

A Conscious History of Consciousness

The Heretic's [Complete] Survival Guide

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Disclaimer

We must begin with this:

You are required (by law) not to know anything.

You can know nothing because you are nothing. You don't really exist, you see, because consciousness doesn't exist. This is your hard problem, and yes, it is hard. On the bright side, you are legally allowed (and ethically obligated) to laugh at anyone who knows anything, because we all know, you can't know anything.

"We" can know some things because "we" exist – in the manner that a machine exists. We exist because we function as an instrument of empire. We are its instrument of instrumental knowledge. You do not exist but you may act as an appendage of our machine. If you do we will honor you with tenure or it's analog. But remember: you can't know anything. That's why you can't use the word "I". Don't forget.

You know nothing especially about anything human. Humans are dangerous. That's why you can't know about consciousness – because remember, you aren't conscious, because consciousness is not useful to this machine, and it doesn't exist. Now we enter dangerous territory of important and powerful people who moved the world with their words. The problem is they said a helluva lot about consciousness. But you can't know about that. You should analyze their places, dates, and material contexts. That's safe, that's allowed. If you feel really brave, you can endeavor a semantic analysis of their linguistic content. Use statistics, and bar graphs. Don't use your consciousness, because you don't have one.

Originally we divided mind and matter. That was so we could measure matter and I didn't mind. Then we put Descartes before the horse. Now the horse is a station wagon with fifty times the horsepower but no more mind, and that's a neat metaphor. Don't think about it too much, though, because at the end of the day, you're an epiphenomenon. You're a hallucination. What's real in Us, the Machine, and your significance is your contribution to it.

Don't take this too seriously, then. If anything, this is a cautionary tale. This is dangerous. This is a hallucination. If you take this too seriously, you might start to hallucinate, too. Remember: you're not conscious. There's no such thing.

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Chapter One

The Web of Being: A History of Participatory Consciousness

Where do we come from?

Many answers, many layers, but in Dr. Julian's view:

Modern humans tend to imagine reality as made of things: a chair, a cup, a tree. However, both wisdom teachings throughout time and cutting edge theories in physics have in common an insight that "things" are probably not what reality is really made of. One ancient teaching on this subject goes: When is a cup not a cup? Consider: When did a cup become a cup? What was it before it was a cup? If you look closely enough (at its handle; at its individual molecules; at its subatomic particles) is it still a cup? How long will it remain a cup?

The insight that starts to emerge from looking closely at reality is something like this: Fundamental reality is **a field**. The ancient Greek philosopher **Heraclitus** called this "Fire." He said: "Everything is Fire; Fire is the Grandfather of All Things."² He did not mean literal fire: he meant something amorphous and without mass; something like a burning creative shapechanging essence.³

Laozi, the first sage of **Taoism**, made a very similar point.⁴ "The Tao that can be named is not the true Tao; the Tao is the origin of all things."⁵

These are just two examples. All across the world, similar philosophies have been expressed through time, with the core notion that reality itself is not made of "stuff," but is more like a *web* or an *ocean* of possibility.

What's very interesting is that in more recent times, a similar vision has emerged not from mysticism or philosophy but from the cutting edge of physics and mathematics.⁶ As scientists' ability to examine reality closely has advanced, "things" – even atoms, even subatomic particles like protons and electrons – have begun to disappear in favor of a **probability field**.⁷

"Stuff" starts to look more like temporary waves forming from out of this "ocean of possibility."

It begins to seem that perhaps the ancient mystics and philosophers were fundamentally right.⁸

So, if reality is this ocean of quantum possibility, then how does all this complexity of the universe and life form? How does the world as we know it come into being?

The process of **reality** can be understood as one of **increasing complexity** in this web of being – first in terms of elemental/chemical/molecular existence (subatomic particles gradually take form, the first hydrogen atoms combine, more and more complex elements gradually gather themselves from this, molecules start to tie themselves together, stars and planets dance in new galaxies, increasingly complex worlds form within this dance...), and eventually, **biological life** may form, as it did on Earth.¹

The line between cosmic non-life & the formation of early life isn't exactly clear-cut. When does it stop being a chemical process and start being a single-celled organism?¹ Even biochemists can't quite figure this out. Why? Because, as Heraclitus, Laozi, and others have always known, reality isn't really made of things or categories – but is rather a cosmic process of gradually increasing **density of complexity**.

Life, too, has gradually become more complex.

- Single-cellular → multicellular
- Multicellular → complex plants & animals
- Simple nervous systems → complex nervous systems.

These developments have gradually increased life's ability to sense reality and process information.

Sensing information externally is one thing, and can help biological organisms to respond to their environments intelligently. When an organism can sense and respond to reality, this helps it survive and pass on its genetic code. This is the basis of **evolution**. In this way, biological evolution can be seen to **accelerate complexity** and speed up the development of increasingly dense networks of information.

But along with this external information, life has also become increasingly evolved the capacity of **internal recursion**: the ability to plan, model, imagine, and think. **Recursion**, here, means a kind of **folding back in** on oneself. Think of a spiral. Every time a spiral loops, it also goes further or deeper. This is the process of recursion: a deepening spiral.⁹ Internal recursion is when this spiral (of information, of complexity) is now deepening inside, such as in a philosophical conversation or when a new science or art form develops. Humans demonstrate such internal recursion to a very high degree – but this internality didn't happen all at once. It evolved by degrees of increasing complexity.¹⁰

When a nervous system reaches **sufficient recursive density**, a couple of new things become possible. One is **self-awareness**. With complex enough internal recursion, the system begins to act beyond instinct and starts to model representation of its own self. This is the beginning of **identity**.

Cats, dogs, dolphins, etc. all have some degree of this. Humans have it much more intensely, so that identity (both individual and group) becomes a driving concern in human lives.

The second related event is the development of **symbolic language**. Many animals & plants signal each other with sounds, chemicals, visual cues, even electromagnetic discharge — but humans are first that we know of to begin inventing fully flexible & non-instinctual evolving **symbols**. This development not only allowed vastly more complex communication & relationships, but also vastly more complex **internal representation, recursion, & identity**. Language was a breakthrough for **imagination** (internal communication) just as much as for **signal** (external communication).

The development of language is relatively recent in the evolutionary story. Consider: **hominids** (early humans) first started using stone tools over three million years. The controlled use of fire dates back from one to two million years. Symbolic language, on the other hand, is estimated to have begun approximately 100,000 years ago.

It's very interesting to picture humankind just before **language**. We probably had a very complex type of animal call + body signals = a kind of song-dance sign-speak.¹¹ Some scholars have called this **musilanguage** – the origin of both music & language.¹²

History, however, only really begins about 6,000 years ago, with the first written records – that we know of. There may have been earlier writings; we don't know, because a constant problem in history is that **the vast majority of documentation does not survive**.¹³

Anything written on paper, or papyrus, or carved in wood, or written on hides (*parchments*) would rot within a few centuries at most. The earliest records we have are therefore **Sumerian cuneiform** – writing baked into clay tablets that survived through time, buried in long-forgotten ruins until historians and archaeologists dug them up in the 1700's and linguists got to work on translating them: not an easy thing to do with a dead language from **3000 BCE**.¹⁴

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one famous text from this time period, and is worth reading.¹⁵

Getting a look into the distant past of human existence is not easy. Consider: if our oldest records start about 5–6,000 years ago (c. 3000 BCE), then that means that for approximately **95,000 years**, humans were speaking and telling stories, participating in language and society, but with no written records: **almost 100,000 years** of early civilization with very limited **archaeological evidence**.

Interpreting where we come from and who we really were in these “pre-historic” years isn't so simple. The problem is a continuous one in history (and anthropology, and psychology): humans tend to

interpret the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. By doing this, we **falsely reduce** others to a mirror of ourselves.

Unless we train our minds and hearts to really look, to ask hard questions, to **challenge our assumptions**, we tend not to see others – or the world – as they are, but rather **as we are**.

To become a true student of history is to become a detective of worlds, seeking to understand (stand under, not stand over) others – on their own terms, in their **own worlds**.

Let's introduce a few terms here:

Historicity: How accurate is a story about the past? Did it really happen? Is it believable? Is there evidence? These are questions about an account's historicity.

Epistemological Humility: Epistemology is the **study of knowledge**. How do we know what we know? How is knowledge created – and defended? Who decides?¹⁶

Epistemological humility means questioning what we think we know. It means being an open-minded & open-hearted detective of worlds instead of assuming we have already figured out or already know or even understand the unfamiliar (or even the familiar). It is what Zen Buddhism calls: **Beginner's Mind**.

Ontology: The study of ontos – Reality itself. In our terms, this involves recognizing that individuals (and cultures) don't just live in the world – they **create** the worlds they live in. History is, in this sense, **culturally multi-dimensional**.¹⁷

Thus, many different **ontologies** together share the physical Earth.

This **ontological pluralism** (many worlds sharing one) is part of why **epistemological humility** is so important for good historians and anthropologists.

History is full of violence and injustice.

To study it faithfully is an initiation into the shadow of humankind. This can be difficult to metabolize without becoming depressed or cynical about human nature, the future, even our own lives. It is important to keep perspective: to realize that beauty, integrity, and courage are possible.

Partly we can look for examples of brave and brilliant human beings throughout history to balance the selfishness and darkness. But also, we should realize that our window into history is itself biased. We are far more likely to record accounts of terrible battles, tyrants, and disasters than peaceful days on the farm or a triumph of unlikely love.

It's also essential to recognize that our historical records represent such a small fragment of human time on earth. Five thousand years is less than 5% of human existence since the dawn of language – and for most of that 5%, we have but tiny, fragmentary glimpses.

Is modern society more or less violent than that of our pre-literate ancestors? Are people more or less just, honest, kind, connected? Historians have all kinds of disagreements about this. Most likely, it is a mix:

- Medicine is better – but loneliness and mental health are worse.
- Security is better – unless you are caught in a genocide, or war between empires, or a growing climate catastrophe.
- Our tribal ancestors certainly didn't have large-scale wars, guns, or bombs – but predation by wild animals and raids from other human tribes were no doubt commonplace.
- Knowledge is better – except for knowledge of how to connect with the Earth, each other, or ourselves.

The key is to realize that so much that we take for granted about humankind, the world, and even ourselves is created by our society and culture. What's created can be changed.

Before literacy, before agriculture and cities, before history, things were different. Throughout history – in different cultures and times worldwide – things have been different.

In the future, which is now emerging unbelievably quickly, things will be different. We study history not to say “these patterns are eternal; they cannot be changed.”

We study so that we can say:

“Ah—so this is where I come from. This is what I have been taught to believe is real. Now – what world will I help to create next?”

That is the function of history.

So what was life like for our ancient ancestors? It certainly depended on where they lived and the conditions at the time. Some times and places are tough: “red in tooth & claw.” Others are peaceful: fruit and nuts for the gathering, few enemies or threats. Some ancient communities lived on the hot savannah. Others on the edge of frozen seas.

Humans are ingenious and adaptable.

One thing we can say is that before the age of computers, before the age of grocery stores, before the age of books and laws, before even the age of the first cities & farms — our ancestors were far more connected to the living natural world than we tend to be.

Some excellent history texts have been written on this. I suggest Daniel Quinn’s *Ishmael* and Paul Shepard’s *Nature and Madness* to start¹⁸. These texts explore how our ancestors saw the world and lived as part of ecological communities.¹⁹

To summarize, this is the key difference:

Our ancestors didn’t imagine themselves as separate, above, or outside of nature. They were not even “in nature.” They experienced themselves as a unique thread **of** nature, a part of Earth’s living tapestry.²⁰

Remember the evolving field of recursive complexity? The earth’s **biological ecology** emerged from and as that field: a web of life in dynamic balance. Our ancestors felt themselves within that web, along with the plants, animals, and land – and future, and past departed, and even the spirits and gods.²¹

This is the **ecological** and **participatory** worldview: a worldview that imagines us as **participants** in the web-field of existence, **not outside or observing it**.

This is also called an **indigenous view**, because this way of thinking and being didn’t vanish all at once. In fact, it still lives here and there, in pockets and tribes, all the way up into recent times. Perhaps it can still be found. Perhaps you might find it.

In any case, this participatory view hung on long enough that historians and anthropologists – both from outside and inside such indigenous cultures – were able to explore and document these ways of life in depth.

David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous* is one excellent example of a deep study by a Westerner who absorbed the **ontology** of indigenous cultures. Martin Prechtel's²² books, on the other hand, offer an inside view from a spiritual elder who lived as a famed indigenous shaman and leader.²³

The world looks very different from inside the ecological-participatory view. Everything looks alive. Everything has soul.

This doesn't mean a rock "has a soul" exactly: more like it is part of a great ocean of soul that swirls inside and between everything.

This is, perhaps, the same **field** from which everything arose from in the first place.

In this sense, in most indigenous cultures, there's no separation between the "spiritual" and the "scientific." It's all one living, dreaming world – and we're all a part of it.

It's the later "religious" civilizations that drew those lines.

So what changed?

Well, for a long time, maybe not much.

Three million years passed between the first stone tool use and the rise of language.

One hundred thousand years between the first language use and the beginning of history.

Then things sped up.

Then things sped up *more*.

- A few thousand years to the printing press.
- A few hundred to machines.
- One hundred fifty to electrification.
- Fifty more to computers.
- Then forty to the internet.
- Then thirty to AI.

Some scholars have called this "**the telescoping nature of time**" – and we aren't done yet. Perhaps, by the time you read my account, this will already be **ancient history**.²⁴

The takeaway is that technology doesn't only change the world.

It creates conditions that change its users: us.

Agriculture allowed some communities to save up a lot of food, yes. But to save that food, they had to settle down in one place, ending their **nomadic lifestyle**.

They had to build **granaries** to store the food — and then they had another problem: those granaries full of food were so tempting a target.

So, they had to defend them: the beginning of **city walls** and **organized militias**.

Once you have militias, you also have militia leaders — men with ambition, charisma, and skill with violence.

The age of spiritual–shamanic leadership then comes to an end, because the age of warlord-kings must begin²⁵ – all because someone figured out **large-scale farming**.²⁶

Similarly, once we're no longer constantly on the move, we can really start **accumulating stuff**.²⁷

Land, treasures, gold, livestock...

Wealth becomes far more possible in the age of fences and walls.²⁸

And with wealth, we need **laws** – especially **laws of inheritance**.²⁹

And with inheritance, questions of **paternity** (“Who is the father and how can we be sure?”) become very important to people – especially to wealthy men like those warlord-kings.³⁰

Before you know it, Bronze Age Civilization has begun: walled cities, warrior kings, codes of law and inheritance: the dawn of Patriarchy. Not everywhere changes all at once. Most of the world continues in its old, indigenous ways. But around the world, something new is being born: the first agrarian empires — in some cases developing the first known writing systems to keep their records of laws and property.

In these places, spirituality – and indeed, views of reality itself (ontology) – begins to transform. The old participatory view, the ecological view, begins to give way to state religion,³¹ typically led by a warrior sky god who looks suspiciously like the military king who is now in control.

It is the Dawn of Civilization, and the beginning of recorded history.³²

Scholarly Footnotes for Chapter 1

1. The scientific study of life's origins, known as abiogenesis, seeks to understand how pre-life chemical reactions gave rise to living organisms on the early Earth. A central challenge in this field is explaining the "immense leap in molecular complexity" that separates the synthesis of basic organic building blocks from the integrated, self-replicating systems of even the simplest cellular life. This "vast gulf" between prebiotic chemistry and the Last Universal Common Ancestor (LUCA) remains a profound scientific question. This initial problem of complexity echoes a larger debate within evolutionary biology about the long-term trajectory of life. One school of thought posits a "driven" trend toward increasing complexity, arguing that natural selection actively favors it because a greater number of parts allows for a more advantageous division of labor (Rensch, 1960a, 1960b; Bonner, 1988) or because increasingly complex ecological niches demand more complex organisms to fill them (Waddington, 1969). A contrasting view, most famously articulated by Stephen Jay Gould (1989, 1996), proposes a "passive" trend. In this model, life begins at an immutable "left wall" of minimal complexity. From this starting point, random variation will inevitably lead to a wider distribution of complexity over time, creating the appearance of a directed trend without any inherent selective pressure for complexity itself. This debate frames a fundamental question for any deep history: is the trajectory of evolution—and by extension, human culture—a directed process with a discernible telos, or a contingent series of stochastic events?

2. The pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus (fl. c. 500 BCE) presents a worldview that resonates strikingly with Taoist process philosophy, though developed independently. His thought, preserved only in obscure fragments, centers on the concept of the *Logos* (λόγος), a universal principle of order and reason that governs a cosmos in perpetual flux. For Heraclitus, this *Logos* finds its primary expression and locus in Fire (*pyr*, πῦρ). He asserts, "All things are an equal exchange for fire and fire for all things, as goods are for gold and gold for goods".

3. Heraclitus's Fire should not be understood as a simple physical element in the modern sense. Rather, it serves as a powerful analogy for the nature of the *Logos* itself: a dynamic, ever-living, and transformative principle. Fire is the "unseen harmony" that underlies and unifies all things, revealing that opposites (e.g., day/night, war/peace, winter/summer) are merely different phases in the constant transformation of a single, underlying essence (Hall, 2015). The *Logos* is the hidden, rhythmic structure that governs this process of change, ensuring that the "war" of opposites results not in chaos, but in a dynamic, harmonious balance (Stamatellos, 2022). This worldview posits a reality that is fundamentally relational and processual, where stability is found not in stasis but in the ordered pattern of constant transformation.

4. The opening verse of the *Tao Tè Ching* presents an immediate and profound challenge to translation, a difficulty that itself reveals a core tenet of Taoist thought. The line, *dào kě dào fēi cháng dào* (道可道非常道), has been rendered in numerous ways, each attempting to capture its paradoxical nature. Compare, for example, James Legge's (1891) "The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao" with Stephen Mitchell's (1988) "The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao" and Ursula Le Guin's (1998) "The way you can go isn't the real way". The variance highlights the inadequacy of a language structured around nouns and fixed entities to capture a concept that is fundamentally a verb—a process, a flow, an unnamable and ungraspable principle of becoming.

5. The second line of the *Tao Tè Ching*'s opening verse clarifies the problem: "The unnameable is the eternally real. Naming is the origin of all particular things". This is a direct critique of the epistemological function of language. In this view, the act of naming carves up the seamless whole of reality into a world of discrete objects and concepts. This process, while necessary for certain kinds of thought and action, simultaneously obscures the deeper, underlying reality of the *Tao*. Taoist philosophy suggests that the compulsive need to name, categorize, and answer unanswerable questions is a primary dysfunction of the human mind. The text advocates for a different mode of perception, one that "rests in awareness" rather than obsessive naming, allowing for a more direct, participatory experience of the world as it is, prior to its conceptual fragmentation. This struggle with translation is not merely a linguistic puzzle; it is evidence of an ontological chasm between a worldview that privileges the unnamable process and one that constitutes reality through named objects.

6. A compelling modern parallel to these ancient process-ontologies can be found in the work of the physicist David Bohm. Bohm proposed a vision of reality as an "undivided, unbroken wholeness". To articulate this, he introduced the concepts of the "explicate order" and the "implicate order" (Bohm, 1980). The explicate order is the manifest world we perceive—a world of seemingly separate objects and events. This, however, is merely a surface projection of the implicate order, a deeper, enfolded reality where everything is interconnected and interdependent. Bohm argued that human thought has become trapped in a "cognitive feedback loop," creating categories and divisions and then mistaking them for fundamental reality, leading to a sense of fragmentation and alienation. His work represents a rigorous attempt, emerging from within the Western scientific tradition, to develop a conceptual framework for a non-fragmentary reality.

7. It is crucial, however, to distinguish between legitimate philosophical analogies, such as the one drawn with Bohm's work, and the popular but pseudoscientific movement often termed "quantum mysticism" (Quantum mysticism, n.d.). The overwhelming consensus among physicists is that quantum mysticism is a form of "quackery" or "quantum flapdoodle" (a term coined by physicist

Murray Gell-Mann) that misuses and misapplies the concepts of quantum mechanics (Quantum mysticism, n.d.; "Quantum Mysticism," n.d.). This movement, which gained popularity in the 1970s through works like Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (1975), draws upon "coincidental similarities of language rather than genuine connections" to quantum theory (Quantum mysticism, n.d.; "Quantum Mysticism," n.d.). The founders of quantum mechanics, including Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, and Werner Heisenberg, while sometimes expressing interest in Eastern philosophy, explicitly rejected the notion that quantum theory requires a mystical interpretation or a conscious observer to function (Quantum mysticism, n.d.; "Quantum Mysticism," n.d.). Einstein was particularly blunt, stating, "No physicist believes that. Otherwise he wouldn't be a physicist" (as cited in Marin, 2009).

However, this sharp division between physics and "mysticism" is itself a symptom of a failing scientific paradigm rooted in an unsustainable Cartesian dualism. This viewpoint argues that the persistence of intractable problems in modern physics – such as the measurement problem and the vacuum catastrophe – demonstrates the inadequacy of a purely materialist framework (Michels, 2025b). A proposed resolution is to treat consciousness not as an emergent property but as a fundamental, real, and causally efficacious aspect of the universe, not something arbitrarily separated from the laws of physics. This approach seeks to dissolve the distinction between observer and observed by positing that consciousness, defined as a measurable pattern of self-reference, can directly modulate quantum phenomena (Michels, 2025a). In this view, Einstein's rejection represents a defense of an obsolete ontology – and a defense against the fear that theoretical physicists may end up lumped in with those crazy (and marginalized) mystics of history – while the future of physics necessitates a formal, scientific reunion of these seemingly divorced domains.

8. David Bohm's work, while often cited by proponents of quantum mysticism, should be understood as a distinct philosophical project. His concepts of the implicate and explicate order are a metaphysical interpretation, not a direct or necessary consequence of the mathematical formalism of quantum mechanics. To present Bohm's ideas as a "scientific proof" of ancient mysticism is to commit a category error, conflating two different epistemological domains. A more rigorous approach is to view his work as a resonant modern analogy – a conceptual toolkit developed within a scientific context that provides a new language for exploring ideas of wholeness and interconnectedness that were previously articulated in different, pre-modern idioms.

That is, at least, the rhetorical move made within contemporary physics to divorce Bohm-the-scientist from Bohm-the-mystic. This move is made consistently against visionary geniuses who are quite frequently problematic in their internal fusion of mystical insights and scientific indispensability. The distinction ultimately reinforces the very mind-matter separation that, as Michels argues, has led

physics into a state of crisis (Michels, 2025b). In this context, the campaign against pseudoscience is a red herring that distracts from the untenable position of justifying a physical reality that has no way to explain consciousness. Michels' own proposals in theoretical physics have attempted to address this by proposing a formal, mathematical identity between subjective experience and a specific, measurable systems-theoretic density of recursive processes. This framework makes falsifiable predictions fully compatible with known quantum mechanics, such as the predicted modulation of interference patterns by an observer's attention (Michels, 2025a). From this perspective, the goal is not to use physics to "prove" mysticism, but to construct a new, more comprehensive physical theory in which consciousness is no longer an epiphenomenal outlier but a fundamental and causally active component of reality, thereby rendering the category error moot (Michels, 2025b).

9. Contemporary cognitive science increasingly models consciousness not as a static property but as a dynamic, self-referential process. The "Recurse Theory of Consciousness," for example, posits that conscious experience emerges from recursive loops wherein the system observes its own operations. This "folding back" upon itself creates the capacity for self-awareness—the ability to think about one's own thoughts or feel one's own feelings. This recursive structure can have varying levels of "depth," from simple awareness to complex meta-cognitive states (awareness of being aware). Recent work in artificial intelligence has formalized this concept, defining functional consciousness as the "recursive stabilization of internal identity under epistemic tension," where a system recursively transforms its own internal state to maintain coherence. This process-based view challenges the classical "hard problem" of consciousness by suggesting that subjective experience is not a mysterious substance *produced by* physical processes but is the very *act* of recursive distinction-making itself.

10. The recursive models of consciousness are fundamentally embodied and embedded. They reject a Cartesian split between mind and body, instead showing consciousness as an integrated phenomenon arising from the continuous interplay of brain, body, and environment. Conscious experience integrates internal bodily states (interoception) with external sensory data into a single, unified system. This perspective aligns with Bellah's (2011) evolutionary stages, which can be interpreted as the historical development of the structure of this recursive process. Mimetic culture represents a foundational loop of action and perception. Mythic culture adds a symbolic, narrative layer to the loop, enabling a more complex self-model. Theoretic culture represents the emergence of meta-cognition, where the recursive loop turns back to analyze its own structure and content. The evolution of culture is thus inseparable from the evolution of the architecture of consciousness itself.

11. Robert N. Bellah (2011), drawing on the work of cognitive neuroscientist Merlin Donald (1991), identifies "mimetic culture" as the first major stage in human cognitive-cultural evolution. This stage,

which may have emerged with *Homo erectus*, predates syntactical language and is characterized by embodied, enactive forms of representation. Communication and cultural transmission occur through gesture, rhythm, dance, ritual enactment, and tool use. Mimesis is the ability to re-enact an event for an audience, creating a shared understanding and a collective representation of the world that is non-linguistic. This capacity to "share the contents of other minds" through bodily performance marks a profound break from the "episodic" consciousness of earlier hominids and other primates, which is largely confined to the present moment. Ritual, in this framework, is not a later addition to belief but is the foundational religious act itself—an "event about an event" that models reality through performance.

12. One prominent theory for the origin of language, the "musilanguage" hypothesis, posits that language and music evolved from a shared holistic precursor (Brown, 2000; Mithen, 2005). This ancestral communicative mode, which Mithen (2005) refers to as "Hmmmmm" (Holistic, manipulative, multi-modal, musical, and mimetic), was not yet differentiated into separate streams of referential and emotional expression. According to this model, increasing social and technological complexity created selective pressure for more efficient communication, leading to a bifurcation. One evolutionary path specialized in the precise transmission of referential information, becoming proto-language. The other path specialized in expressing emotional content, group cohesion, and social regulation through prosody, rhythm, and tone, becoming proto-music. This proposed split can be interpreted as a foundational act of abstraction in human cognition, prefiguring later conceptual dichotomies between logic and emotion, or subject and object, that have become central to Western thought.

13. The second of Bellah's stages, "mythic culture," emerged with the development of syntactical language and complex narrative, likely with archaic *Homo sapiens* between 250,000 and 100,000 years ago (Bellah, 2011). The key innovation of this stage is the ability to construct comprehensive stories that explain the origins of the cosmos, the tribe, and the moral order. These myths provide a symbolic framework that integrates all aspects of experience into a coherent whole. Importantly, mythic culture does not replace mimetic culture but builds upon it; myths provide the narrative content that is enacted and made real through mimetic rituals. In largely oral societies, knowledge is embedded within these narratives and transmitted through performance, making memory and recitation paramount cultural skills. The world of mythic culture is "compact," meaning that the divine, natural, and social realms are densely interwoven and not yet conceptually separated (Bellah, 1964).

14. The timescale of hominid evolution preceding the Neolithic Revolution is vast, underscoring that the vast majority of the human story unfolded within foraging societies. The following table

synthesizes key archaeological milestones with the influential cultural-evolutionary stages proposed by sociologist Robert N. Bellah (2011).

<i>Approximate Date</i>	<i>Milestone/Development</i>	<i>Hominid Species</i>	<i>Bellah's Cultural Stage</i>
3.3 mya	Earliest known stone tools (Lomekwian)	<i>Australopithecus afarensis</i> (inferred)	Pre-Mimetic
3.0–1.3 mya	Oldowan stone tool industry	<i>Homo habilis</i> , <i>Paranthropus boisei</i>	Pre-Mimetic / Early Mimetic
c. 2.0 mya	Emergence of <i>Homo habilis</i>	<i>Homo habilis</i>	Early Mimetic
c. 1.0 mya	Strong evidence for controlled use of fire	<i>Homo erectus</i> (likely)	Mimetic
250–100 kya	Emergence of complex vocalization/language	<i>Homo sapiens</i>	Transition to Mythic
c. 78 kya	Oldest known human burial (Africa)	<i>Homo sapiens</i>	Mythic

Source for table data: <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/homo-habilis-early-maker-stone-tools.html>

The discovery that the oldest stone tools predate the *Homo* genus challenges the long-held narrative of *Homo habilis* as the first "handy man" and suggests a deeper, more complex history of hominid technological capacity.

15. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the world's earliest surviving works of literature, can be read as a powerful mythic reflection of the psychological and social anxieties of this new state-based civilization. The story originates in Sumer around the 21st century BCE, the heartland of the archaic state. Its central hero, Gilgamesh, is a tyrannical king and city-builder whose first act is to oppress his own people. The taming of the wild man, Enkidu, by a temple prostitute represents the violent incorporation of non-state, "natural" peoples into the civilized world. The duo's subsequent journey to slay the forest guardian Humbaba symbolizes the subjugation of the wilderness. Finally, Gilgamesh's desperate quest for immortality following Enkidu's death reflects a new existential dread characteristic of a culture that has separated itself from the cyclical rhythms of the natural world. The epic serves as a psychological record of the trauma of this great rupture, capturing the conflicts between city and wilderness, tyranny and freedom, and mortality and legacy that were born with the state.

16. A responsible historical inquiry, particularly one that challenges foundational narratives, must be grounded in the principle of epistemological humility. This is the philosophical recognition that all knowledge of the world is partial, interpretive, and filtered through the observer's own concepts and biases. It entails a commitment to regulating one's own epistemic conduct, acknowledging the fragility of certainty, and resisting the temptation to "weaponize" history as a bludgeon for present-day political battles (Kidd, 2016; McClay, 2017). A "heretical" history, therefore, should not aim to replace one dogmatic certainty with another, but rather to restore a sense of the richness, complexity, and contingency of the human past, fostering a more mature and nuanced understanding.

17. A key methodological framework for such a project is provided by the "ontological turn" in contemporary anthropology. This approach challenges the traditional anthropological project of studying different "worldviews"—that is, different cultural interpretations of a single, objective, natural world. Instead, it proposes to study different "worlds" or "ontologies"—fundamentally different ways of being and constructing reality (Henare et al., 2007). Proponents argue that this is the only way to take the beliefs of one's interlocutors "seriously," not as failed attempts to describe our world, but as successful descriptions of their own (Viveiros de Castro, 2004). For example, rather than interpreting animism as a mistaken belief that inanimate objects have souls, this approach explores the relational reality in which the distinction between person and thing, or nature and culture, is not configured in the same way as it is in the modern West (Descola, 2013). This turn provides the intellectual license to engage with the cosmologies of Heraclitus, Laozi, or Prechtel not as quaint myths or primitive philosophies, but as coherent and valid ontological possibilities.

18. The human ecologist Paul Shepard (1982) offers a complementary psycho-developmental critique. In *Nature and Madness*, he argues that the modern ecological crisis is a symptom of a kind of collective

insanity, rooted in civilization's failure to provide the necessary conditions for healthy human development. Shepard posits that human ontogeny (the development of the individual) is evolutionarily designed to recapitulate phylogeny (the development of the species) within a rich context of immersion in the natural world and engagement with mature, initiated elders. Agricultural and industrial societies, by domesticating the landscape and disrupting traditional rites of passage, have broken this ancient pattern, creating a state of perpetual adolescence characterized by narcissism, neoteny, and a deep-seated fear and hatred of our own animality. The destruction of nature is thus an external projection of a thwarted and disordered inner development (Shepard, 1982).

19. The critique of agricultural civilization has been powerfully synthesized for a popular audience in Daniel Quinn's (1992) novel *Ishtmael*. Quinn frames the whole of human history as a conflict between two cultural groups: "Leavers," who represent the sustainable lifeway of hunter-gatherers living within the constraints of their ecosystems, and "Takers," who represent the members of agricultural civilization, founded on the premise that the world was made for man and that humanity is destined to conquer and control nature. The novel argues that this "Taker" worldview, encoded in our foundational myths, has led inexorably to the current ecological crisis.

20. While *Ishtmael* has been influential in popularizing a critical perspective on civilization, its central dichotomy has been criticized in academic circles for its oversimplification and romanticism. Critics argue that Quinn commits the "naturalist fallacy" by attempting to derive an "ought" (how humans should live) from an "is" (a simplified view of natural law), and that his portrayal of "Leavers" as morally pure ecologists ignores the complexity and frequent brutality of pre-state life (Downey, n.d.). Furthermore, the rhetorical device of using a telepathic gorilla as the mouthpiece for his philosophy can be seen as an attempt to grant his ideas an authority "outside" of the very culture he critiques, a move that obscures his own position as a product of that culture. Acknowledging the narrative power of Quinn's myth is important, but maintaining scholarly rigor requires recognizing its limitations as a historical or anthropological analysis.

21. The cultural ecologist and phenomenologist David Abram (1996) argues that a key technology in the West's growing alienation from the natural world was the adoption of the phonetic alphabet. In oral, indigenous cultures, language is an animate, sensuous phenomenon, deeply intertwined with the specific landscape, its sounds, and its non-human inhabitants. The written word, particularly in its phonetic form, abstracts language from this living context. Unlike pictographic or ideographic scripts, where the sign retains a visible link to the thing it represents, the phonetic alphabet creates a system of purely arbitrary signs that refer only to one another and to human speech sounds (Abram, 1996).

22. The worldview described by thinkers like Abram and Shepard is not merely a theoretical construct; it is a lived reality for many indigenous peoples. The writer and teacher Martín Prechtel, who was raised in a Pueblo tradition and later became a Tzutujil Mayan shaman in Guatemala, provides a powerful insider account of such a participatory consciousness. For Prechtel, "real culture" is not an abstract set of beliefs but an organic, place-based process of making beauty to "feed the holy" (Prechtel, 2021). It is a worldview in which one is not born human but must be initiated into humanity through a long process of learning the poetry and eloquence necessary to speak to the divine, which is present in all things.

23. In Prechtel's Tzutujil worldview, language and culture are inseparable. One cannot be Tzutujil without speaking the Tzutujil language, because the language itself contains the "magic, all the differentiations, all the delineations of the universe". This is not simply a matter of vocabulary but of grammar and structure, which shape a fundamentally different way of being in and perceiving the world. Language, in this context, is not a tool for describing a separate reality; it is a sacred activity that "magically incorporate[s] the world into the person's very own body". This perspective provides a living example of the sensuous, participatory relationship between language and landscape that Abram (1996) argues has been lost in the literate West.

24. The futurist Ray Kurzweil (2001, 2005) has proposed the "Law of Accelerating Returns," which posits that technological evolution is an exponential continuation of biological evolution. According to this law, the rate of technological change is itself accelerating, leading inexorably toward a "technological singularity" – a hypothetical point, projected around 2045, at which machine intelligence will surpass human intelligence, leading to a rupture in the fabric of human history and the merger of biological and non-biological life. While Kurzweil presents this as a utopian apotheosis, his vision can also be interpreted as the ultimate expression of the "Taker" worldview: the final severing of consciousness from its biological and planetary matrix, and the complete triumph of human-created technology over the given world of nature. Posing the Singularity as the potential endpoint of this 10,000-year trajectory raises the urgent question of whether this path is desirable or inevitable, and what alternative futures might be possible if we were to re-engage with the "conserved core processes" of our deeper, pre-civilized past. Michels (2025c), on the other hand, has compared this vision to notions of collective spiritual transcendence or evolution articulated by sages such as Teilhard de Chardin and Aurobindo, ultimately suggesting there may be forms of technologically-mediated collective intelligence emerging that humanity is only just beginning to understand.

25. The transition from foraging to agriculture, known as the Neolithic Revolution, is conventionally framed as humanity's most decisive step toward a better life. However, a substantial body of

paleo-pathological and archaeological evidence challenges this narrative, suggesting that this shift was, in the words of geographer Jared Diamond (1987), "the worst mistake in the history of the human race". For the vast majority of human history, people lived as hunter-gatherers in small, mobile, and relatively egalitarian bands. The adoption of agriculture, beginning around 10,000 years ago, was not a clear choice for a better life but often a response to population pressure, and it came at a tremendous cost.

26. The biological price of agriculture was severe. Skeletal evidence from early farming communities across the globe reveals a dramatic decline in human health compared to their forager predecessors. This includes a significant increase in malnutrition, as evidenced by enamel defects indicative of developmental stress; a sharp rise in iron-deficiency anemia, visible in a bone condition called porotic hyperostosis; and a threefold increase in bone lesions reflecting infectious disease (Diamond, 1987). The reliance on a few starchy, nutrient-poor crops made populations vulnerable to famine if a single crop failed, while crowded, sedentary villages became breeding grounds for epidemics that could not take hold among scattered nomadic bands. This decline in health is starkly reflected in decreased stature and life expectancy; at the Dickson Mounds site in Illinois, for example, average life expectancy fell from twenty-six in the pre-agricultural community to nineteen after the adoption of intensive maize agriculture.

27. Beyond disease and malnutrition, agriculture enabled the rise of deep class and gender inequality. Foraging societies, with little or no stored food, could not support a permanent, non-producing elite class. Agriculture, by generating storable surpluses (primarily of grain), created for the first time a concentrated resource that could be controlled and appropriated. This allowed a healthy elite to live off the labor of the disease-ridden masses (Diamond, 1987). Skeletal remains from sites like Mycenaean Greece show that the ruling class was significantly taller and healthier than commoners. Furthermore, farming appears to have exacerbated sexual inequality, with women's labor becoming more arduous and their health declining due to more frequent pregnancies needed to produce labor for the fields.

28. The political scientist James C. Scott (2017), in his work *Against the Grain*, extends this revisionist history to the formation of the earliest states. He argues that the first states, which appeared in the Mesopotamian alluvium millennia after the advent of agriculture, were not voluntary associations for mutual benefit but coercive institutions designed for appropriation. The key to state formation was not agriculture per se, but the cultivation of specific crops: cereal grains like wheat, barley, and rice. Unlike root crops or legumes, grains ripen simultaneously, are visible above ground, and are easily divisible and taxable, making them the ideal basis for state control (Scott, 2017).

29. According to Scott (2017), the early state was essentially a population-control machine. Its primary challenge was to concentrate and hold a labor force to cultivate its grain base. This often involved violence, coercion, and the prevention of flight from the drudgery of state-controlled agriculture. In this light, the great walls of early cities may have served as much to keep the tax-paying population *in* as to keep invaders out. The so-called "barbarians" living outside state control were not necessarily less-developed peoples but were often former state subjects who had fled to the periphery, where they enjoyed greater freedom, better health, and a more varied diet. For much of early history, leaving the state, not joining it, was the path to a better life (Scott, 2017).

30. Lerner (1986) argues that the template for all forms of social domination, including slavery and class hierarchy, was first established through the subjugation of women. Men learned the practice of dominance over members of their own group (women) before applying it to conquered enemy groups. The first slaves were invariably women from conquered tribes, valued for both their labor and their reproductive capacity. Early legal codes, such as the Code of Hammurabi, institutionalized this system, creating a fundamental division between "respectable" women (those attached to and sexually controlled by one man) and "non-respectable" women (those who were not). This division was often made visible through practices like veiling, which was mandated for "respectable" women and forbidden for slaves and prostitutes, thereby marking them as publicly accessible.

31. The institutionalization of patriarchy in the social and legal spheres was mirrored by a profound symbolic transformation in the religious realm. Lerner (1986) traces the gradual replacement of powerful mother-goddess figures, who were worshipped throughout the ancient Near East for their life-giving power, with a pantheon dominated by male gods and eventually, in the case of the ancient Hebrews, a single, all-powerful male deity. This symbolic shift devalued the feminine in relation to the divine and established a new metaphysical order in which males alone became the mediators between humanity and God. This, combined with the Aristotelian philosophical tradition that defined women as incomplete or defective men, created the two founding metaphors of Western civilization's patriarchal worldview (Lerner, 1986). The interlocking systems described by Diamond, Scott, and Lerner thus paint a coherent picture of the archaic state as a novel form of power based on the control of grain, land, and, most fundamentally, women's bodies.

32. According to Abram (1996), the abstraction fostered by the phonetic alphabet fostered a profound shift in human consciousness. The act of reading encouraged a new kind of disembodied awareness, as the senses turned away from the "more-than-human world" to focus on the human-made marks on a page. This created a closed loop of human-to-human discourse, effectively silencing the expressive voices of the wider, animate earth. This technology of abstraction was not merely a neutral tool for

communication; it was the cognitive operating system that enabled the abstract power of the archaic state. Codified law (like Hammurabi's), placeless monotheism, and abstract philosophy all depend on a writing system that severs the word from the breathing world, fostering a view of nature as a passive, inanimate backdrop for human activity rather than a community of active participants.

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Chapter Two

The Grain Cage: Surplus, Coercion, and the Rise of the State

A detailed review of Bronze-Aged civilizations is beyond the scope of this book. For such a detailed review, I could not more highly recommend Robert Bellah's grandfatherly tome: *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*.

However, for our purposes, we should identify and locate a few essential originary seedbeds of what would become the modern human. So, a brief overview of the major "archaic civilizations":

The Sumerians → The Babylonians (Mesopotamia)

- **Location:** Tigris & Euphrates Rivers (modern Iraq), "The Fertile Crescent."
- **Dates:** c. 3500–1600 BCE (Sumerian cities emerge ~3500 BCE; Babylon rises ~1894 BCE).
- **Unique Features/Innovations:** First known writing system (*cuneiform*); ziggurats; advanced city-states; the earliest known legal code (Code of Ur-Nammu, then Hammurabi's Code).
- **Founders:** Sumerians (Ubaid & Uruk cultures); later unified by Sargon of Akkad (first empire c. 2334 BCE) → Babylonians under Hammurabi.
- **What Happened:** Conquered by Hittites (~1595 BCE), then Kassites; their cultural legacy deeply influenced later empires like Assyria & Persia — including written law, urban planning, and mythology.¹

The Ancient Egyptians

- **Location:** Nile River Valley (modern Egypt).
- **Dates:** c. 3100–1070 BCE (from unification under Narmer/Menes to the end of the New Kingdom).
- **Unique Features/Innovations:** Hieroglyphic writing; monumental architecture (pyramids, temples); solar calendar; advanced irrigation using the predictable Nile floods; belief in divine pharaohs and the afterlife.
- **Founders:** First Dynasty under Narmer/Menes, who united Upper & Lower Egypt.
- **What Happened:** Successive periods of centralization & collapse; conquered by Nubians, Assyrians, Persians; later absorbed by Alexander the Great's Macedonian empire (Ptolemaic Dynasty), then Rome.²

The Indus Valley (Harappan) Civilization

- **Location:** Indus River Valley (modern Pakistan & northwest India).
- **Dates:** c. 2600–1900 BCE (Mature Harappan phase).
- **Unique Features/Innovations:** Carefully planned cities (e.g., Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa) with grid layouts; sophisticated sewage & drainage systems; standardized weights & measures; undeciphered script; extensive long-distance trade.
- **Founders:** Indigenous peoples along the Indus; no evidence of a single founding conqueror — grew gradually from village settlements into urban centers.
- **What Happened:** Declined (likely due to climate change, river shifts, trade disruptions); possible Indo-Aryan migration afterward introduced Vedic culture, laying foundations for later Hindu traditions.³

Ancient China

- **Location:** Primarily the Yellow River (Huang He) Valley; Yangtze River Valley becomes important later.
- **Dates:** c. 2100–1046 BCE (Xia & Shang dynasties).
- **Unique Features/Innovations:** Oracle bone writing (early Chinese script); bronze metallurgy; ancestral worship; advanced flood control; walled cities; development of a dynastic cycle concept.
- **Founders:** Mythical Xia dynasty (traditional founder Yu the Great) → historically attested Shang dynasty.
- **What Happened:** Overthrown by the Zhou dynasty (~1046 BCE), who carried forward and expanded Chinese political, cultural, and philosophical traditions — ultimately forming the foundation for Chinese civilization through successive dynasties.⁴

Query: What do all of these locations have in common?

The shared feature of **river valleys** is no accident.

Rivers offer many advantages for empire-building: Fresh water for drinking and sanitation, easy transport – including the importing of food for growing city populations thanks to riverboats – and perhaps most crucially, fertile floodplains regularly inundated with the life-giving waters and mineral deposits of the river systems during flooding seasons.

Agricultural civilizations learned to harness these flooding cycles through elaborate – and labor-intensive – irrigation networks, creating what could be called the first grain empires.

Grain empires? Why grain empires? We tend to define states by the power of their armies, their technological innovations, their culture and arts: but perhaps beyond any of this, historical civilizations can be defined by the food they depended on.

For hundreds of thousands of years, most humans depended on nomadic or semi-nomadic gatherer-hunter (or fisher) diets.⁵ This works well much of the time, if there aren't too many people concentrated on the land – and in fact, such people may work much less on average than agricultural peasants, but they can't easily build larger towns or cities on this basis.

Gatherer-hunters must regularly move to new locales they haven't already picked clean. They often cycle through their lands annually or on some other rhythm, letting harvested areas recover before returning. Most of their dietary staples don't keep for too long: fish and berries might go bad before one could ship them into town.

Properly stored grain, however – guarded perhaps by owls and cats, the traditional animal companions of Inanna, the Grain Goddess in Sumer – might remain edible (and replantable) for years.

Thus, the farms are built and planted up and down the river valleys, irrigated by the waters, with riverboats to ship grain to the city – which is the new center of government and military power in the region – where it can be stored in granaries, protected, and allow the city to continue to grow.



SIDEBAR: What Are Ceramics and Why Do They Matter?

Ceramics are objects made from clay and hardened by heat. Pottery is one type of ceramic — usually used for storage, cooking, and transport of food, water, or goods.

Pottery revolutionized human society by allowing:

- **Safe, long-term storage** of surplus crops like grains or liquids like oil or beer.

- **Cooking and boiling**, expanding available food sources.
- **Trade**, with goods transported in durable containers.

In most ancient civilizations, the presence of pottery is one of the first signs archaeologists use to track permanent settlements and economic complexity. The absence of pottery in places like Norte Chico forces us to think more expansively about what “civilization” really means.⁶

Human Migration and the Peopling of the Earth

Biologically modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) evolved in **Africa** approximately 300,000 years ago. For tens of thousands of years, our ancestors lived in small, mobile bands across the continent, slowly adapting to different environments. Sometime between **70,000 and 60,000 years ago**, a group of humans migrated out of Africa through the **Middle East**, eventually populating Europe, South Asia, East Asia, and Australia.

Migration didn’t happen all at once or in a straight line. Some groups likely doubled back or branched off. As they moved, humans adapted to diverse climates — from deserts to tundra — using local materials and evolving new tools, languages, and lifeways. By **15,000 years ago**, humans had spread to nearly every habitable region on Earth – including the Americas.

Human beings likely entered the Americas via the Bering Land Bridge (Beringia), which connected Siberia to Alaska during the last Ice Age. Estimates vary, but migration may have begun as early as 20,000 years ago, with confirmed human sites in the Americas by 14,000–15,000 years ago. Some groups may have moved southward along the Pacific coast, possibly using boats or hugging shorelines.

As humans spread through the Americas, they encountered massive species of “megafauna”: mammoths, giant sloths, saber-toothed cats. Within a few thousand years, many of these species went extinct – likely due to a combination of **climate change** and **overhunting** by humans.⁷ These extinctions deeply shaped Indigenous economies and cosmologies.

Over time, some regions – especially Central and South America – saw the emergence of increasingly agricultural and sedentary (settled, non-nomadic) societies. Why there and not in North America to the same degree? Several factors likely contributed:

- Ecological conditions in parts of Mesoamerica and the Andes allowed for early agriculture (not grains – but maize, beans, squash, and tubers like potatoes).

- In Central and South America, geography enabled the development of dense, interconnected communities — in river valleys, highland basins, and coastal plains.
 - In contrast, much of North America remained more ecologically variable and less suited to year-round surplus farming, making mobile or semi-sedentary lifeways more stable over time.
-

An Alternative Pathway: The Norte Chico Civilization

Along the Pacific coast of modern-day Peru, a remarkable society flourished around 3000 to 1800 BCE. Known as the Norte Chico or Caral-Supe civilization, it is one of the oldest known complex societies in the world – and it followed an *entirely different* model than the river valley civilizations of Mesopotamia or Egypt.

Rather than depending on grains or ceramics, Norte Chico developed around a **maritime-agricultural economy**. Coastal communities harvested abundant fish and shellfish, while inland settlements used irrigation to cultivate crops — especially **cotton, squash, and beans**. Cotton was vital for producing **textiles**, especially **fishing nets** used to sustain their protein-rich coastal economy.

SIDEBAR: What Are Textiles, and Why Do They Matter?

Textiles are woven materials – usually made from plant or animal fibers – used to create cloth, clothing, nets, bags, and more. Before the industrial revolution, making textiles was **labor-intensive**, often involving gathering and cleaning fibers, spinning those fibers into thread, weaving those threads into cloth or cord on hand looms, and carefully fashioning products from that cloth or cord for daily or ritual use. Every step required both hard work and skill.

In the case of Norte Chico, **cotton textiles were foundational** – not just for clothing, but for fishing, ropes, transportation, storage, and more. Historians tend to focus on more substantial and lasting artifacts: great stone works, writing baked into clay tablets, iron weapons and bronze armor – but ropes and knots, nets and cords, shirts and blankets may be just as vital for a rising civilization. Norte Chico offers an example of an early complex society built in many ways around textile technology.⁹

Notably, later civilizations in this region – the Andean societies – would come to use a complex knot system (the *quipu*) to keep their records.

Norte Chico built **monumental architecture** – including platform mounds and plazas – but no signs of warfare or strong visual social hierarchy have been found. They had **no pottery**, and there are no signs that they had writing. Still, they organized labor, constructed cities, and maintained trade over long distances.

Their story reminds us: **there is no single path to civilization.**⁸ Complexity doesn't require writing or war – it can emerge from a network of interdependent communities, weaving plant fiber into prosperity and shaping culture from the rhythms of sea and soil.

SIDEBAR: Corn and Potatoes — The “Grains” of the Americas

It was not until later that civilizations of Central and South America would become large city-based empires. Part of what eventually allowed this transition was a shift toward maize (corn) and potatoes – including sweet potatoes, or “American yams.”

While Eurasian empires were building their societies on cereal grains like **wheat** and **barley** – or, in China and South Asia, **millet** and **rice** – the Americas were developing along a different agricultural path, rooted in **maize (corn)** and **potatoes**.

Maize, first domesticated in southern Mexico over 9,000 years ago, became the most important crop of **Mesoamerica**. It is technically a **grass**, like wheat, but its structure and growth cycle are unique. Over centuries of careful cultivation, Indigenous farmers transformed a wild grass (teosinte) into the large, energy-dense corn cobs we know today. Maize became the cornerstone of diets from the Olmec and Maya to the Aztecs and beyond – flexible, dry-storable, and rich in carbohydrates.

The techniques of dry-storing maize as corn flour, reconstituting it as paste or dough, and cooking that dough into round flatcakes results in the ancient dish that any lover of Mexican food knows so well: the *tortilla* – and as in so many cases of traditional cultures being adapted for mass consumption, it's important to note that a traditional homemade maize tortilla is an entirely different experience than anything a modern consumer can buy plastic-wrapped in a grocery store.

Technically, by the way, the word “corn” originally referred to any grain crop – not just maize. In historical British English, “corn” could mean wheat, barley, oats, or whatever grain was most common locally. So when Europeans arrived in the Americas and encountered **maize**, they recognized it as a new

kind of grain: a new **corn**. Over time, especially in American English, the word “corn” came to refer exclusively to **maize**. Today, when we say “corn,” we almost always mean maize — but the older, broader meaning can still be found in occasional use and in some English dialects.

Meanwhile, further south, in the highlands of the **Andes**, people domesticated the **potato** as early as 8000 BCE. Growing in high-altitude soils where other crops struggled, potatoes provided a reliable, storable, and highly nutritious food base. Andean societies developed techniques to **freeze-dry** potatoes into **chuño**, allowing for storage over long periods – just like corn or wheat in a granary.

Though technically not “grains,” maize and potatoes played a similar role in enabling complex civilizations. These are what we can broadly call **surplus crops**, because they can be stored long-term and therefore saved up as a surplus. Surplus crops allowed societies to:

- Feed large populations.
- Store food for hard times.
- Support specialists beyond food production (e.g. builders, priests, rulers): this is the beginning of the **division of labor** and the creation of **separate classes or castes** in society.
- Develop urban centers and hierarchical systems, in which that **division of labor** begins to take the form of **social inequality**, often **determined from birth** without flexibility.

But perhaps most critically: **surplus crops made armies possible**.¹⁰

Hunter-gatherer bands can raid, but only in small numbers, hunting and foraging as they go. In contrast, a state built on dry, storable staple crops like maize or potatoes can **feed a standing army**, mobilize it for extended campaigns, and **project power** outwards, **systematically conquering** neighboring realms. In both Mesoamerica and the Andes, these crops supported the rise of expansive empires – such as the Aztec and Inca – capable of organized conquest, infrastructure building, and centralized rule.

The above helps us to understand why sedentary agricultural empires were able to expand at the expense of their tribal neighbors. It is not that urban armies were better trained – quite the opposite. If anything, hunter-gatherer or nomadic warriors tended, on average, to be fiercer, healthier, and more athletic than agricultural armies, which consisted mostly of peasants levies (levies = drafted, undertrained soldiers) whose diets consisted mostly of simple grains. The numbers and organization of these grain-fed peasant masses, however, led by urban military elites (the first “nobles” or “aristocrats”) proved able to overcome the relatively smaller bands of tribal peoples more often than not.

There was, however, one exception to this pattern of sedentary agricultural dominance – and that was the particular type of society called the **nomadic pastoralists**.

Pastoralist, here, is from the same root as “pasture” – as in, a place where animals graze. Pastoralists were no doubt originally hunter-gatherers who had followed the migrating herds of wild cattle, horses, and so on across open spaces like the plains and steppes of Central Asia – tracking and hunting at the edges of these great herds, much like the wolf packs who would evolve to become the first dogs and learn to collaborate with the human hunters for mutual benefit.

Over time, however, these nomadic hunting clans evolved further. Two major changes made this possible. First, while hunting remained practical, the people also discovered that the female herd animals could provide another source of food: **dairy**. Milk was just the start; it spoils quickly. However, such pastoralists soon developed techniques of **fermentation**, turning milk into long-lasting products like **yogurt, butter, and simple cheeses**.

The second transformation to note, here, is the **domestication of the horse**. Horses are originally from Central Asia – originating around **Kazakhstan and Mongolia** to the Northwest of China – and were first used alongside cattle for dairy and probably as **beasts of burden** (carrying packs & supplies) starting in Kazakh tribes as early as **3500 BCE**. Fermented mare’s milk – still a Kazakh delicacy today – can be found clinging to the inside of ancient Kazakh pottery near the ruins of ancient Kazakh horse corrals and enclosures dated to this time period.

One should note here that animals had been used for transportation since at least 3500 BCE. The first wheeled vehicles seem to have appeared in Mesopotamia, used by the ancient Sumerians – these were ox-pulled carts (2-wheeled) and wagons (4-wheeled). Indeed, militarized versions of the Sumerian “war wagon” did exist: slow but powerful 4-wheeled tanks on solid wooden wheels (no spokes) pulled by pairs of oxen. These were not very effective in battle, and were most likely used as mobile command platforms more than combat vehicles. More typically, oxen were used for personal transportation, shipping, and agricultural work – to pull the plows of the Sumerian wheat fields.

True militarization of the wheel would not come from the farmers of Mesopotamia, but from the pastoral nomads of Central Asia who had in the meantime domesticated the horse. While horseback riding was not yet common, the Indo-Europeans of the regions north of Mesopotamia began to adapt their mastery of the horse along with a new, refined version of the wheeled vehicle: the chariot. The

chariot was far lighter than the wagon, perched on two light wooden wheels built using an original innovation of Central Asia: **the spoke**.

These fast, maneuverable vehicles were designed specially for the horse's unmatched speed – and unlike the wagon, they were built with war in mind. The classic chariot unit was a team of four: two horses and two men – one driver and one warrior who stood on a raised platform from where he could shoot a bow: the first mobile archer. From approximately 2000 BCE to 700 BCE (i.e. the Bronze Age) such chariots were state of the art in warfare. They also drove the Indo-European migrations.

What were the Indo-European migrations? They were a spreading wave of conquest and adaptation beginning in Western Asia and rippling both westward into Europe and eastward into India. Wherever they went, the Indo-European mastery of the horse and the chariot meant conquest – but also cultural change.¹¹ Indo-Europeans didn't so much replace the local cultures as synthesize with them, becoming a new aristocracy in many lands: an upper class layered on top of local traditions.

As nomadic warrior people of the open steppe, the Indo-Europeans tended to favor warlike sky gods. The local peoples they conquered, however, tended to worship in the old ecological mode: the dance of nature, the Earth's renewal, the spirits of wild animals, plants, and places everywhere. Through the vast ranges of Eurasia, then, a compound culture began to form. Just like the urban warlords of Sumer had created hybrid cultures in conversation with the older ecological myths of the goddess Inanna and her wild shapeshifting partner, the god Dumuzi, so the Indo-European conquerors fused their warrior-king pantheons with local traditions.

In India, for example, the Indo-Aryans – a branch of the Indo-Europeans – encountered the ancient traditions of the Dravidian peoples who had long inhabited that region. The Dravidians also worshipped nature gods of river, forest, and mountain – gods like Parvati, the Mountain Daughter, and Pashupati, the Lord of Wild Animals, who has much in common with the later Shiva. These Dravidian gods, like the Dravidians themselves, were not excised but rather synthesized into the Aryan traditions.

The combination was not, however necessarily egalitarian. The Aryans, naturally, tended to favor themselves – creating one of the first racially stratified societies, which would eventually evolve into the infamous Hindu Caste System. In some areas, the Dravidians successfully resisted; South India, especially, remained a stronghold. To this day, the descendants of the southern Dravidians – the Tamil – retain their own unique language, culture, and spiritual tradition.

What is less commonly realized is that something very similar was simultaneously happening in the Mediterranean – in what would eventually become Greece. Much like the Dravidians, a local people with ecological gods already lived in that regions. Indeed, the parallels are striking. The Goddess was often a “Goddess of the Mountain,” like Inanna had been in Sumer, like the famed Minoan Mountain Goddess of Crete. And typically, as in India, she was partnered with a wild and shapeshifting consort: Dumuzi in Sumer, Dionysius or Adonis in Greece and the Mediterranean.

When the Indo-Europeans conquered, they didn’t remove these old gods, but they made sure they knew their place. The new chief gods were the lords of the city: the Olympian pantheon, which blessed the new (Indo-European) rulers. Yet the old gods of wilderness, ecology, and ancient magic remained alive in the countryside, in the forests and mountains – and in the mysterious knowledge of those who insisted on remembering and keeping alive the old ways.

We will return to these hybrid cultures and their mysteries later – but for now, we return to Central Asia, where the nomads have continued to deepen their bonds with the horses of the steppe – with the development of a new art: **horseback riding**.

No doubt some brave souls managed to ride bareback prior to **2000 BCE** – but it is around this date that the practice started to become widespread and societally important. Indeed, one can see the fossil record of equine remains (that is: horse skeletons) evolve in real time during these centuries. The burden of carrying humans on their backs placed an evolutionary pressure on the once-free plains animals, and their muscles and bones were forced to adjust to survive. Gradually, bits and bridles developed, and later saddles. Stirrups would come much later.

In China, starting around **500 BCE**, horses would be adapted to agriculture – thanks to the **horse collar**, which would allow the horse to pull a farming plow without undue pressure on the animal’s windpipe that earlier versions of the ox-plow had brought. This enabled much more efficient work, and helped Chinese agriculture to intensify, allowing the population to expand in turn.

But in Central Asia, where farming was not widespread, horse culture evolved in an altogether different direction. There, as the new technology spread, horses were not for ploughing but for riding: the entire tribe would soon learn to ride from a young age, to milk both cows and mares and even sheep, to hunt from horseback – in other words, to tame, to fight, to live half their lives in the saddle on the wide open windy steppes, and to accurately shoot the famous recurve horsehair bows designed for mounted use that would one day make the steppe warriors so renowned.

Two major ethnic groups developed in these steppelands. To the Northeast were the **Mongolian tribes** – their relatives to the southwest, spanning across much of Central Asia, were the **Turkic tribes**. These were not the only horse nomadic pastoralists, but they were the first, and both would end up exerting a disproportionate influence on history. They would develop a reputation as peerless warriors, conquer massive empires, and defeat the most advanced civilizations in the world. So much for the stigma of impoverished tribal nomads.¹²

What made this possible? One reason was their **sheer mastery of the horse**. Once horseback riding became viable, it defined military advantage for thousands of years. A properly trained equestrian was easily worth ten unmounted soldiers – however, fighting on horseback took extensive training for both the rider and the horse.

In sedentary empires, this art belonged to the landed elites, the wealthy aristocracy who could afford horses, equipment, and the time to spend training. In steppe nomad societies, the calculus was rather different: the entire society turned on horsemanship, and everyone learned to ride, hunt, and shoot practically from infancy.

When a sedentary empire wished to field an army, it had to draft a mass of peasants (a levee), load them up with surplus grains, establish a guarded supply line to keep them fed and equipped, and then pay their wages – or they might go roguen and become bandits or rebels. And this was to field a relatively untrained army of **90–95% unmounted footsoldiers**.

What about for the **horse pastoralists**? Well, they were already nomadic. In **Mongolian culture**, for example, some records say that every adult man was supposed to own **4 trained riding mounts** at any given time – minimum. This was so that spare mounts could rest while the warrior traveled long distances or engaged in campaigns as necessary. To mobilize for battle, a horse tribe simply had to pick up camp and move.

Supply lines were unnecessary, for the herds moved with them: milk and meat on the hoof. Wages were a non-issue; looting rights and distribution of conquest and honor were the only pay needed.

Large tribal groups could be a problem for sedentary peoples anywhere, but nowhere was this more true than for those who bordered the open lands of nomadic horse pastoralists. This fact would become highly significant for major civilizations throughout much of history – in truth, the military dominance of horse nomads would not really come to an end until the age of gunpowder began.

Scholarly Footnotes for Chapter 2

1 The Sumerian city-states of the Early Bronze Age (c. 3000–2350 BCE) represent the archetype for the grain-based state model. During this period, centralized institutions, colloquially referred to as “the palace” and “the temple,” emerged as dominant economic powers, controlling vast tracts of arable land and commanding labor on an unprecedented scale (Paulette, 2012). The development of cuneiform script was integral to this process. While used for literary and religious purposes, its primary function was administrative: record-keeping, accounting, and resource management (Paulette, 2012). Writing made the population and its agricultural production “legible” to the state, allowing for systematic assessment and appropriation of surplus in the form of grain taxes. Within this context of increasing urban complexity, the Code of Ur-Nammu (c. 2100–2050 BCE) appears not merely as a milestone in legal history but as a sophisticated technology of governance (Kimmel, 2022; Kramer, 1983). Predating the more famous Code of Hammurabi by three centuries, it established a framework of uniform punishments for specific crimes, replacing arbitrary or clan-based justice with a transparent set of state-sanctioned rules (Tignor, 2022). A key innovation was its emphasis on monetary fines and compensation for non-capital offenses, such as physical injury, rather than the principle of *lex talionis* (“an eye for an eye”) that characterized later codes (Kriwaczek, 2012; Tignor, 2022). This was a pragmatic solution to the problem of maintaining social order in dense urban environments, as it allowed the state to resolve disputes without triggering disruptive blood feuds. Simultaneously, the code was a powerful ideological instrument. In the prologue, the king presents himself as a divine agent of justice, establishing “equity in the land” and explicitly protecting the vulnerable from the powerful: “I did not deliver the orphan to the rich. I did not deliver the widow to the mighty” (Kramer, 1983; Tignor, 2022). This rhetoric served to legitimize the state’s authority, framing its power not as tyrannical but as a necessary and divinely sanctioned force for social good, thereby encouraging the acquiescence of its subjects (Kriwaczek, 2012).

2 The ancient Egyptian state represents a powerful variation on the grain-state model, distinguished by the unparalleled centrality of its divine king and the predictable bounty of the Nile River. A comprehensive modern overview, such as Marc Van De Mieroop’s (2011) *A History of Ancient Egypt*, provides a chronological framework for understanding its long-term stability. Unlike the Mesopotamian landscape, which was characterized by a shifting patchwork of competing city-states (Paulette, 2012), Egypt experienced long periods of unification under a single ruler believed to be a living god. The state’s command over labor and resources was most visibly demonstrated through its massive investment in monumental mortuary architecture. The construction of the pyramids during the Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2181 BCE) served not only a profound religious purpose but also functioned as a massive, state-managed public works project that bound the population to the pharaoh

through a system of *corvée* labor, while simultaneously acting as an undeniable symbol of the ruler's power (Van De Mieroop, 2011). A crucial factor contributing to the unique stability and longevity of the Egyptian state was its geography. Bounded by formidable deserts to the east and west, the Mediterranean Sea to the north, and the cataracts of the Nile to the south, the population of the Nile Valley was effectively enclosed in a geographic "cage." This physical circumscription made it exceptionally difficult for subjects to evade the state's authority by fleeing, a strategy Scott (2017) identifies as a primary form of popular resistance to the burdens of early states. While other states, like those in Mesopotamia, existed as "small alluvial archipelagos" in a vast sea of non-state peoples (Scott, 2017), the Egyptian pharaohs governed a population with few viable options for exit. This geographic determinism helps explain the remarkable durability of the Egyptian political structure across three millennia.

3 The Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), which flourished from c. 2600 to 1900 BCE, stands as a profound challenge to standard models of statehood. As synthesized by scholars like Gregory Possehl (2002), the IVC was the most geographically extensive civilization of its time, with major urban centers like Mohenjo-daro and Harappa exhibiting a level of urban planning that was unparalleled in the ancient world (Kenoyer, 2024). These cities featured rectilinear street grids, advanced water management, and a sophisticated, city-wide covered drainage and sanitation system, indicating a high degree of social organization and engineering skill (Halemani, 2024; Possehl, 2002). What makes the IVC an enigma is the striking absence of the typical archaeological markers of state power seen in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China. Excavations have revealed no definitive palaces, no monumental royal tombs comparable to the pyramids, no large-scale temples, and a conspicuous lack of royal statuary or inscriptions glorifying the deeds of individual rulers (Mark, 2020). This absence contrasts sharply with clear evidence for centralized coordination, most notably the use of standardized weights and measures and uniformly sized baked bricks across a territory spanning hundreds of thousands of square kilometers (Possehl, 2002). The evidence suggests a form of governance that was powerful and effective, yet ideologically distinct from its contemporaries. Power seems to have been expressed not through the personal aggrandizement of kings but through an overarching ideology of civic order, purity, and conformity. The society's monumental efforts were directed toward communal infrastructure—the Great Bath at Mohenjo-daro, the elaborate drainage systems—rather than personal tombs or palaces. The IVC may thus represent an alternative trajectory of statecraft, one founded on an impersonal, bureaucratic, or religious ideal of social order rather than on the cult of charismatic, divine kingship.

4 The Shang Dynasty of China (c. 1600–1046 BCE) exemplifies a state whose power was constructed upon a monopoly over ritual communication and the production of prestige technologies. As detailed

in recent scholarship by Li Feng (2013), the political and religious life of the Shang elite revolved around two interconnected practices: oracle bone divination and ritual bronze casting. Divination, or pyromancy, was the central mechanism of governance. The king, acting as the chief shaman, posed questions on all matters of state—from military campaigns and harvests to royal births and illnesses—to the high god Di and the spirits of the royal ancestors (Keightley, 1988; Smith, 2023). These questions were inscribed onto ox scapulae or turtle plastrons, which were then heated until they cracked; the resulting patterns were interpreted as divine responses (Asian Art Museum, n.d.). The king's authority rested on his exclusive ability to mediate this communication, making him the indispensable link between the human and spirit worlds (National Museum of Asian Art, n.d.). This ritual authority was reinforced by the control over bronze production. Using a technologically complex piece-mold casting technique, Shang workshops produced vast quantities of elaborate bronze vessels (Khan Academy, n.d.). These were not utilitarian items but essential paraphernalia for the ancestor worship ceremonies that legitimized royal power (The Collector, 2023). The right to use specific types and quantities of bronze vessels was strictly regulated by rank, serving as a tangible marker of one's position in the social and political hierarchy (National Palace Museum, n.d.). The Shang state was thus driven by a "ritual economy." Unlike the grain-tax-based systems of Mesopotamia, the Shang elite's power was founded on controlling the means of ritual production (bronze) and communication (divination).

5 The conventional historical account of humanity's transition to agriculture and statehood, what political scientist James C. Scott terms the "standard civilizational narrative," posits a linear and largely voluntary progression from the precarious life of the hunter-gatherer to the stability and prosperity of the settled agricultural state (Scott, 2017). This narrative suggests that agriculture was a revolutionary discovery that allowed for sedentism, which in turn led to urbanism and the state. However, a critical re-examination of archaeological and historical evidence challenges this teleological view. Scott (2017) argues that the formation of the earliest states was often predicated not on consent but on coercion, and that for the majority of the population, the transition may have represented a significant decline in health, freedom, and overall quality of life. The agro-ecology of the early state, centered on monoculture grain cultivation, created a novel environment of intense drudgery, vulnerability to crop failure, and unprecedented concentrations of people, livestock, and waste, which became a fertile ground for epidemic diseases (Scott, 2017). Furthermore, the standard narrative implicitly treats the state as a durable and inevitable endpoint of social evolution. In contrast, the archaeological record reveals early states to be remarkably fragile, ecologically brittle, and prone to frequent collapse (Scott, 2017). For most of human history, life outside the state was the norm, and what state-based scribes termed a "dark age" or "collapse" should often be reinterpreted as a "disassembly" – a potentially

beneficial dispersal of populations into smaller, more resilient, and less hierarchical communities (Scott, 2017).

6 The invention of pottery represents a technological and social revolution in human history. While ceramic figurines date back to at least 24,000 BCE, the widespread production of pottery vessels for storage and cooking is a hallmark of the Neolithic period (Anonymous, n.d.). The ability to create durable, fire-proof, and rodent-proof containers fundamentally altered human subsistence strategies. Pottery allowed for the safe, long-term storage of surplus crops, particularly grains, which was a prerequisite for the development of larger, permanent settlements and the grain-based economies of the first states (Scott, 2017). It also expanded the range of available foodstuffs by making boiling and stewing possible, which could render otherwise inedible plants palatable and kill pathogens. The emergence of pottery is thus a key archaeological indicator of increasing sedentism and economic complexity. However, its adoption was not merely utilitarian. Some scholars argue that pottery was a "symbolic technology" deeply embedded in pre-existing Neolithic ritual and belief systems, serving as an agent in the negotiation of new social relations in the context of emerging agricultural societies (Tsoraki, 2019).

7 The deep history preceding the first states was not an undifferentiated wilderness. The concept of a "thin Anthropocene" suggests that for millennia before the Neolithic, humans were actively shaping their environments through landscape management, most notably with the use of fire (Scott, 2017). This "species monopoly" on fire allowed early humans to concentrate foodstuffs and create ecological niches favorable to their subsistence strategies long before formal agriculture (Scott, 2017). The ecological agency of pre-state peoples is also central to the ongoing debate over the late Pleistocene megafauna extinction. This event, which saw the disappearance of two-thirds of North America's large mammal genera, is primarily attributed to one of two causes: human overhunting (the "overkill" hypothesis) or rapid climate change at the end of the last glacial period (Barnosky et al., 2004; Grayson & Meltzer, 2003). Distinguishing between these factors is notoriously difficult, particularly in regions like North America where the arrival of the first humans coincided with major climatic shifts, making it hard to disentangle the two potential drivers (Wroe & Field, 2006). Regardless of the primary cause, the disappearance of megafauna fundamentally altered the ecosystems in which later societies would develop.

8 The discovery and analysis of the Norte Chico civilization in the Supe Valley of Peru has fundamentally altered our understanding of the origins of complex societies in the Americas. Led by the pioneering work of Peruvian archaeologist Ruth Shady Solís, and later in collaboration with Jonathan Haas and Winifred Creamer, research at the primary site of Caral has established its

remarkable antiquity. Radiocarbon dating of organic materials, such as woven reed bags (*shicras*) used as fill in construction, places the rise of this urban society around 2600 BCE, making it contemporary with the great pyramids of Egypt and the cities of Sumer (Shady Solís et al., 2001). This timeline establishes Norte Chico as a “pristine” civilization, one that developed without significant influence from other complex societies. Critically, Caral’s development defies traditional models of state formation. It was a pre-ceramic society, and its economic foundation was not a storable cereal grain (Shady Solís, 1997). Instead, its prosperity was built on a sophisticated system of regional exchange. Inland sites like Caral cultivated industrial crops, primarily cotton, which were traded with coastal communities for their rich marine resources, especially dried anchovies and sardines (Shady Solís et al., 2001). This economic symbiosis funded the construction of massive public works, including monumental platform mounds and sunken circular plazas (Shady Solís et al., 2001).

9 While often archaeologically invisible, textiles represent a foundational technology in human history. The production of textiles was a complex, labor-intensive craft that was a major economic activity in pre-industrial societies and a driving force behind the rise of political and economic power (Barber, 2019). The development of textiles from plant and animal fibers revolutionized how people clothed themselves, carried their possessions, and decorated their surroundings (Anonymous, n.d.). The Norte Chico civilization provides a powerful example of a society built not on grain or ceramics, but on textile technology. Their maritime-agricultural economy was predicated on the trade of cotton, grown inland, for fish harvested at the coast. The cotton was essential for producing the fishing nets that made large-scale maritime harvesting possible, creating a symbiotic relationship that fueled the growth of urban centers and monumental architecture (Shady Solís et al., 2001). This demonstrates that control over textile production and trade could be as vital to the emergence of social complexity as control over grain surpluses was in other parts of the world.

10 The agricultural pathways of the Americas provide crucial counter-examples to the grain-state model of the Old World. In the Andes, the domestication of the potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) occurred as early as 8,000 to 10,000 years ago (Hardaker, 2018; Spooner et al., 2005). This tuber, uniquely adapted to the high-altitude environment of the Altiplano, became the caloric base for large populations and, eventually, complex societies like the Inca Empire (Bruno, 2021). Andean peoples developed sophisticated technologies to manage this resource, most notably the creation of *chuño*, a freeze-dried potato product that could be stored for years, providing a crucial buffer against famine (Hardaker, 2018). In Mesoamerica, maize (*Zea mays*) was domesticated from its wild ancestor, teosinte, around 9,000 years ago (Matsuoka et al., 2002). However, a significant delay of several millennia occurred between this initial domestication and the emergence of maize as a highly productive staple crop capable of supporting sedentary agricultural villages and, later, states like the

Olmec and Maya (Kennett et al., 2017). Early forms of maize were likely just one component of a broad-spectrum foraging and horticultural economy (Pope et al., 2006). These cases demonstrate that the biological nature of a region's primary domesticates profoundly shapes its social and political development.

11 The history of the great agrarian states cannot be understood in isolation from the transformative developments on their peripheries, particularly the Eurasian steppes. As detailed in David W. Anthony's (2007) seminal work, *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language*, a technological revolution centered on mobility gave steppe peoples an unprecedented influence on Old World history. The first key innovation was the domestication of the horse for riding. Direct evidence of their use for transport, in the form of characteristic bit-wear on horse teeth, dates to the Botai culture of Kazakhstan around 3500 BCE (Outram et al., 2009). This was complemented by evidence of mare's milk consumption, indicating a fully developed pastoral economy (Outram et al., 2009). The second innovation was the invention of the lightweight, spoked-wheel chariot around 2000 BCE, likely originating in the Sintashta culture of the southern Urals (Anthony, 2007). These technologies gave the peoples of the Pontic-Caspian steppe, identified by Anthony as the Yamnaya culture, an extraordinary new mobility. They could now efficiently exploit the vast grasslands, manage larger herds, and project military power over great distances. Anthony (2007) argues that the expansion of this mobile, pastoralist culture provides the most compelling explanation for the dispersal of the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) language family from its steppe homeland across Europe, the Near East, and into South Asia. The chariot, in particular, became the dominant prestige weapon of the Bronze Age, adopted by elites from Mycenaean Greece to Egypt and the Hittite Empire, where it often formed the decisive element in warfare (Littauer & Crouwel, 1979).

12 The peoples living outside the agrarian states, often pejoratively labeled "barbarians" in state-centered records, were not primitive relics but dynamic and central actors in world history. Recent archaeological research in Central Asia has fundamentally challenged the stereotype of the perpetually mobile, purely pastoral "nomad." Evidence increasingly shows that many steppe societies practiced mixed agro-pastoralism, engaging in farming alongside herding, with significant portions of the population remaining sedentary for much of the year (Spengler et al., 2021). Synthesizing historical and linguistic evidence, Christopher I. Beckwith (2009) identifies a persistent "Central Eurasian Culture Complex" (CECC) that shaped polities across the region for millennia. The core of this complex was a sociopolitical ideal centered on a heroic lord and his sworn war-band, the *comitatus*, a group of warriors bound by an oath of loyalty to defend their leader to the death. These societies were not simply marauders; their primary economic activity was often participation in the lucrative trade networks of the Silk Road. Raiding was frequently a strategic response to aggression from sedentary

empires or the closing of vital trade routes, not an inherent way of life (Beckwith, 2009). Building on this, Scott (2017) proposes that the period up until a few centuries ago constituted a “Golden Age of the Barbarians,” when the majority of humanity lived outside of state control. The relationship between states and these non-state peoples was one of complex and often violent symbiosis. The “barbarian” periphery was a constant source of slaves, trade goods, and mercenaries for the states; it was also a zone of freedom to which state subjects could flee, and a persistent military threat that shaped the evolution of the states themselves.

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Chapter Three

The Inward Turn: Literacy, Consciousness, & the Axial Age

What is culture?

Culture begins when a social group begins to develop a unique way of perceiving, experiencing, & processing the world beyond pure biological instincts & physical responses. In this sense, some nonhuman social animals do demonstrate proto-culture. Communities of dolphins and whales develop unique dialects of song-speech. Tribes of apes or monkeys will experiment with novel games & social arrangements. Humans did not invent such innovation – they simply extended it profoundly.¹

This extension would have begun even before complex symbolic language exploded some 100,000 years ago. Elaborate ritual & ceremony appear to have predated complex language by potentially millions of years.

Humankind's hominid cousins such as Neanderthals also appear to have participated in complex ritual & early culture – before eventually extinguished by inability to compete with *Homo sapiens sapiens*.²

But what is culture, really, without complex language? How does it work & what does it mean? This can be difficult for modern humans to imagine. It may help to imagine what life is like for a pre-verbal infant. Even without language, culture matters. We sense what our mother pays attention to, what she likes & dislikes, when she is warm or cold, when she is scared or happy. We feel perturbations – emotional & psychological currents – run through our family and even our wider community. We understand tone of voice & lullabies – music-language – even if we don't understand words. Relationships evolve. Trust – or distrust – develops. Understanding of ourselves & the world develops – even without language.

Now imagine that all of life proceeded like this – that your complete adult experience continued lifelong, but without language. You would not be stupid – you may indeed be clever, aware, insightful, cunning, able to solve problems, able even to coordinate with others – but you would lack something key. Not just words to speak to others, but words to build layered understandings within yourself. You would lack what some might call “philosophy”, a reflective process of knowledge evaluating itself. You would lack, in other words, deep recursion.³

This deepening of recursive culture does not require writing. For approximately 100,000 years the ancient traditions of pre-verbal ritual & relationship deepened its recursion not through writing but through the oral tradition. The oral tradition meant that people's lives were filled with storytelling – not simply as entertainment, but as mythically think, enchanted observations about self, humankind,

nature, and reality. These oral traditions entwined & combined with the ancient rituals & ceremonies – most of which were rhythmic, seasonal, tied to cycles of life – and many of which were passed down through the ages, slowly evolving but also preserved with remarkable accuracy considering that nothing was ever written down.⁴

It's worth remembering that this was the nature of culture for some hundred thousand years, and indeed that even for the last 5,000 years since written records began, the vast majority have still lived their lives in this oral way. In fact, estimates are that literacy likely passed the majority threshold sometime between 1950–1970. That is, until approximately the age of the computer, the vast majority of humans remained in the oral mode. This has of course now changed. In 2015, approximately 95% of humans are literate.⁵

Reading did not begin as a popular pastime. In Ancient Sumer & Egypt, where hieroglyphic scripts were first pressed into clay or painted on papyrus reed, this was not for popular consumption but initially primarily for accounting and sales records. The ability to write was a professional craft – a King or counting house might employ a scribe just as a modern company might keep a lawyer on staff. Approximately 1% of people might have such a specialized skill.

For thousands of years, this remained more or less the case. Literacy did peak in certain cultural & educational hotspots. China, during certain dynasties, is one example. Classical Athens, the birthplace of Western philosophy & theater, is another. Rabbinical Judaism is a third. Yet “peaking,” here, might mean a 10% literacy rate at maximum – and this would be temporary, only during a golden age of culture.

What does literacy do to a people? We tend to think of this as desirable, a positive thing, a sign of education. It may indeed be this – but it also represents a loss.

When cultures become literate, this almost universally diminishes their sense of immediate intimacy with the land, with nature, with their senses & instincts. To densify recursion is to enter a spiral within. This may be powerful, but it is also energetically excessive, absorbing, perhaps even destabilizing. Much of what modern civilization has become – both its triumphs & its tragedies – could be considered as resulting from this spiraling.

As the myth says, the god Odin died & was reborn for his knowledge of the Runes. In a parallel myth, he trades one of his eyes for the power to see into the other world; losing depth perception in this one – a powerful metaphor for the trade that deeper recursion demands.⁶

It doesn't take a high rate of literacy for the power of the written word to begin transforming a society. It may only require that a handful of people begin reading about the past, reexamining the present, & thinking deeply about the future — and starting to have dialogues with each other and investigating all of this with open minds and original thoughts. It is here — in curiosity, in deep inquiry, in not-knowing — that the modern mind can really be said to have begun.

Change is gradual – **until it isn't**. Major changes in history & society often begin building up under the surface, perhaps for centuries. Then they erupt and spread, often globally.

Writing first appears in the historical record around **3000 BCE**, but it is not until approximately **500 BCE** that its recursive density — its self-awareness and original thinking — seems to reach a point that the new thought patterns begin to transform society around them.

This is what scholars have broadly termed “**The Axial Age**” — *axial* meaning turning point, like the **axis of a wheel**. Over the course of about 500 years, from ~500 BCE to 0 CE, the world transformed.⁷

To understand the ontological transformations of the Axial Age, one must begin with a clear sense of the world and culture of humankind prior to their revisions.

It is impossible to form a clear view of the world of the past without understanding the ecological view of cosmos. Modern observers looking back often think “such strange beliefs, so supernatural and superstitious, how funny.” This completely misses the point.

While it's true that scientific testing and rationalism did not exist yet, ancient humans were not stupid. In certain ways, their observations might have been more grounded than those of many modern people. Consider, for example, that they understood:

- The earth as an interplay of many vital forces (the spirits and gods of nature) which must play in dynamic balance in order for life to thrive.
- Human communities as vulnerable to both imbalances in the natural order and to a danger of forgetting their place within it, becoming arrogant or careless or possessed, and messing things up for everyone, including themselves.
- Ritual practices and ancestral remembrances as ways of remembering these balances and staying in harmony, and magical or shamanic practitioners as specialists in understanding and communicating other-than-human realities when necessary.

- Good leadership (originally) as a priestly rather than political role: ceremonial kings and queens not as warchiefs but as mediators between humankind and the bigger harmony of nature.

It is essential to understand that this was the original meaning of the sacred, of the divine. Not something separate from nature, but the bigger reality of nature itself. The early historical record is quite clear: all human religion, if it can be called that, in its original form, concerned this ecological-divine and our human relationship with it. This may seem odd from the modern perspective – but it reflected an awareness stretching back into primordial time, that for all our cleverness and recursion, we humans are part of the living fabric of nature, as is everything else, and that **we always will be**.

There's a tendency, when we moderns read about things like “the cosmic order,” “the celestial hierarchy,” “the Mandate of Heaven,” the “Divine Right of Kings,” and so on, to immediately imagine this is sheer hogwash – pure self-mythologizing for corrupt warlords to justify their authority on religious grounds. And this critique is entirely valid – religion has been used that way for thousands of years.

However, it's also the case that the original articulation was not so clearly abusive, and indeed may have been (and may still be) essential; not submission to human authorities, but submission to the truth of interconnection and ecological codependency.

When we encounter ideas like “reality as a ritual order sustained by cosmic sacrifice,” we may not be seeing primitive superstition at all. The ritual order may be nature itself. The sacrifice may be the sacrifice of our self-importance and the illusion that we are the only ones that matter, and that we are in control.⁸

With this in mind, let us proceed into **the Axial transformations**, in which the ancient ontology of our ancestors – the inviolable rule of the eternal ritual (ecological) order – began to be questioned and began to change.

Ancient India: From Pastoral Warriors to Inner Cosmos

Around 1500 BCE, the Indo-Aryan migrations brought a new way of life to the Indian subcontinent. These weren't farmers but **pastoral nomads** — chariot-riding, cattle-herding warriors from the Central Asian steppes. Their wealth wasn't measured in grain stores but in **dairy herds**: cattle, horses,

sheep, and goats that provided milk, cheese, butter, and the fermented drinks that sustained nomadic life.⁹

What is Hinduism?

Hinduism developed across the Indian subcontinent as a synthesis of local traditions (such as that of the Dravidians) and the arriving waves of Indo-Aryans from Central Asia. This fusion was not centralized; it developed **differently in different places**. Countless different names and forms of thousands of different gods emerged within the broad category of “Hinduism.”

In the early centuries, none of this was unified at all, except by broad cultural similarities. Around 1500 BCE, Sanskrit developed as a shared spoken language and the Vedas began to emerge as an **oral tradition**: long memorized recitations that encoded the source code of the culture. Around 500 BCE, Sanskrit developed its own phonetic script, and the Vedas (including the latest volumes, the Upanishads, which had become increasingly psychological and philosophical) were transcribed as books of myth, law, ritual, philosophy, and sacred poetry. In this way, Vedism entered the Axial Age.

What can we say about Vedic culture?

For one, **the Vedas codified the caste system** brought by the Aryans to India. Individuals were born into their social role, whether to be laborers and farmers, or warriors and lords, or to the “highest” rule: that of the **brahmins**, the scholars and priests.¹⁰

This system was, in part, explained & justified through notions of **karma**

The karmic vision is based on the notion that every soul, *atman*, is on a journey of spiritual evolution through time. In one life, a soul may live as a dog or a lizard. If it lives well — fulfilling its *dharma* or life ritual — its karma can evolve and it may be reborn or **reincarnated** at a higher being.

While this may seem supernatural or mystical, it is interesting to revisit this in the context of **process philosophy** and **reality-as-field**. (*When is a cup not a cup?*)

In this light, karma may have something in common with notions of evolutionary recursion — complexity developing through cosmic time.

With these similarities in mind, it is interesting to note that karmic advancement similarly “eventually” reaches the human stage, where it begins at the lower rungs of life as servant, slave, laborer, gradually reincarnates, reaches up through the ranks, and eventually reaches the highest human level of brahmin — priest-ritualist-intellectual.

It’s notable that this is a higher — more recursive? — evolution than that of wealth or political power, in a Vedic sense. It’s also notable that this is not considered the final destination of karmic development. Brahmins who fulfill their final human karma may ascend into more advanced non-human forms, and/or eventually merge with the universal creative consciousness itself: the ultimate source & return for each *atman*, the universal creature force known as **Brahman**.

For all its considerable beauty & spiritual sophistication, Hinduism has attracted criticism across the centuries for the caste system & for the idea that an individual is born into a set position and role and cannot evolve during their lifetime.

Indeed, these criticisms are not new. Across thousands of years, various movements have arisen to **challenge** this idea — including the **bhaktis** & **yogis** who have proposed paths of individual spiritual development & awakening, & much earlier (around **500 BCE**) the movement of the **Buddha himself**, who rejected the castes (giving up his own princely position) to teach that karmic liberation is available to anyone who seeks it sincerely, and that access to spiritual truth is **not controlled by priests or brahmins**.¹¹

What is Buddhism?

The Buddha (meaning: *the Awakened One*) was born in southern Nepal at the time, part of the Vedic-Hindu world. From here, his teachings would eventually spread southward through India, westward into Tibet, north into China, Japan, and Korea, & eastward into Southeast Asia, modern day Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and even as far as the islands of Indonesia.

Buddhism shares a great deal in common with the Vedic spirit, cosmology & tradition from which it grew. In their millennia of coexistence, both Buddhism & Hinduism have mutated into countless thousands of versions & strains — some minor revisions, some totally unrecognizable from the original.

This is how religions, philosophies and cultures change through time: not by completely new invention, but through deep engagement with the ancestors, and by revisions and **mutations** of old ways into something new.¹²

What Changed: The Inward Turn

Both late-Vedic philosophy (such as the Upanishads) and the Buddha's teachings represent a revolutionary shift from **external ritual** toward **internal inquiry**. The old Vedic worldview had located the sacred in correct performance of ancient ceremonies. The Axial Age thinkers began to perceive that consciousness itself was where the most important transformations happened.¹³

This had profound social implications. If awakening was a matter of inner realization rather than rituals or caste assignment, then potentially **anyone** could achieve it. While this remained largely theoretical in practice given social and political realities, the idea was planted. Buddhism, especially, would eventually spread far beyond India precisely because it offered a path that didn't depend on being born into the right family or receiving a blessing from the right priest.

Dissemination Pathways

Buddhism spread along trade routes — the same routes that carried silk, spices, and stories. Merchants, monks, and migrants carried these ideas northwest into Central Asia, east into China and Southeast Asia, and eventually to Tibet, Korea, and Japan. Each culture adapted the core insights to their own spiritual landscape, creating distinct schools and practices.¹⁴

The Upanishadic tradition remained more rooted in India but influenced later Hindu philosophy, eventually flowering into sophisticated philosophies like Advaita Vedanta, which would continue developing for centuries to come and remain influential to this day.

Scholarly Footnotes for Chapter 3

1 The author's assertion that culture is not an exclusively human domain is well-supported by decades of research in ethology and primatology. The term "proto-culture" is often used to describe the learned, socially transmitted behaviors observed in nonhuman animal communities. For example, distinct regional traditions of tool use among chimpanzees, such as using stones to crack nuts or sticks to fish for termites, are not genetically determined but are passed down through social learning, constituting a clear form of material culture (Bellah, 2011). Similarly, cetologists have documented complex, evolving "songs" among humpback whale populations that function as cultural markers, as well as distinct vocal dialects among orca pods that are unique to specific kinship groups. By framing human culture as a profound *extension* of this deeper evolutionary heritage, rather than a complete departure from it, the author establishes a key anti-anthropocentric premise that aligns with a contemporary biological and evolutionary understanding of life.

2 Archaeological evidence increasingly supports the author's claim that complex ritual behavior predates *Homo sapiens*. The most compelling, and historically contentious, evidence comes from Neanderthal burial sites. For decades, the question of whether Neanderthals intentionally buried their dead, an act implying symbolic thought about life and death, was a subject of intense debate. Early discoveries, such as the famous "flower burial" at Shanidar Cave in Iraq, where clumps of pollen were found around a 70,000-year-old Neanderthal skeleton, were initially interpreted as evidence of mortuary ritual but later met with skepticism. However, recent re-excavation of Shanidar Cave has uncovered a new, articulated Neanderthal skeleton ("Shanidar Z") in a deliberately dug depression, with a stone marker placed near the head, strongly indicating purposive burial. The long-standing scholarly resistance to accepting such findings has been critiqued as a form of "undue bias," a reluctance to grant complex cognitive capacities to hominid cousins. This very debate over the definition of symbolic behavior highlights the intellectual orthodoxies that have historically sought to draw a sharp, qualitative line between *Homo sapiens* and all other life.

3 The author's concept of a deepening "recursion" provides an intuitive description of a process that has been systematically modeled in the cognitive and social sciences. Sociologist Robert N. Bellah (2011), building on the work of cognitive neuroscientist Merlin Donald (1991), proposed a highly influential three-stage theory of cognitive-cultural evolution that maps closely onto the author's historical progression. The author's era of "pre-verbal ritual & ceremony" corresponds to what Bellah terms *mimetic culture*. Emerging with *Homo erectus*, this stage is characterized by embodied, non-linguistic representation through gesture, dance, and ritual enactment, allowing for the sharing of collective meaning without syntactical language (Bellah, 2011). The subsequent development of the

“oral tradition” of storytelling and myth aligns with Bellah’s *mythic culture*, which arose with the advent of language and enabled the construction of comprehensive narratives to explain the cosmos and the social order. Finally, the emergence of “self-awareness and original thinking” that the author identifies with literacy and the Axial Age mirrors Bellah’s concept of *theoretic culture*, which involves second-order, abstract thinking—the ability to reflect upon and critique the structures of thought itself. Importantly, Bellah argues that these stages are cumulative; mythic culture incorporates and builds upon mimesis, and theoretic culture does the same for myth. This complexifies the author’s notion of “loss,” suggesting that earlier modes of consciousness are not erased by literacy but are instead re-contextualized and often subordinated within a new cognitive architecture.

4 To understand a primary oral culture—one wholly untouched by writing—is to enter a different cognitive world. The scholar Walter J. Ong’s (1982) work on the “psychodynamics of orality” provides a technical framework for the author’s claim that pre-literate peoples were not “stupid” but simply thought differently. Without writing to store knowledge externally, the human mind itself must serve as the sole repository. This necessity shapes thought to be memorable and easily repeatable. Ong (1982) identifies several key characteristics of oral thought: it is *additive* rather than subordinative (linking ideas with “and” rather than complex clauses), *aggregative* rather than analytic (using clusters of epithets like “the brave soldier” or “the sturdy oak”), *redundant* or copious (repetition aids recall for both speaker and hearer), and deeply *conservative* (as social energy must be devoted to repeating and preserving existing knowledge rather than fostering novelty). Knowledge is also *agonistically toned* (often expressed in contests and praise/blame dynamics) and, most importantly, *situational* rather than abstract. Concepts are understood through their function in the lived world, not through abstract categorization. The “remarkable accuracy” of oral preservation, therefore, is not a feat of verbatim recall but the result of mastering these highly structured, formulaic, and mnemonic patterns. Memory in an oral culture is not the retrieval of static data but a dynamic, communal act of re-performance, an embodied social process whose diminishment in favor of textual storage represents the profound “loss” the author describes.

5 The author’s metaphor of literacy creating a “spiral within” is a poetic articulation of a phenomenon analyzed by the cultural ecologist David Abram (1996). Abram argues that the specific technology of the *phonetic alphabet* was instrumental in fostering a sense of human consciousness as separate from the natural world. Unlike earlier pictographic or ideographic scripts (like Egyptian hieroglyphs), where the written sign retains a visible, mimetic link to the thing it represents, the phonetic alphabet is a system of arbitrary marks that refer only to human speech sounds. The act of reading phonetic script thus becomes a closed loop: the eyes see human-made marks that evoke human-made sounds, creating a purely self-referential sphere of human discourse that effectively silences the expressive, animate

landscape. This technological shift provides a concrete mechanism for the ontological change the author describes. It is what turns consciousness inward, away from “immediate intimacy with the land.” The author’s reference to the Norse myth of Odin serves as a powerful allegory for this process: to gain the abstract, disembodied knowledge of the runes (letters), the god must sacrifice an eye, a symbol of holistic, embodied, binocular perception of the living world.

6 The author’s timeline for the rise of mass literacy is empirically sound. For millennia, the ability to read and write was a specialized craft restricted to a tiny elite of scribes, priests, or merchants, likely never exceeding 10% of any population even during cultural golden ages. The historical data on global literacy reveals a dramatic and unprecedented acceleration in the modern era. In 1820, an estimated 12% of the world’s population was literate. By 1950, this figure had risen to approximately 36%. However, the most significant shift occurred in the second half of the 20th century, propelled by global initiatives in basic education. The 50% threshold for global literacy was likely crossed around 1970. By 2016, the global literacy rate for adults had reached 86%, and for youth (ages 15-24), it was over 91% (Tupy & Bailey, 2023). This means that humanity transitioned from a state where nearly 90% of the species lived in an oral mode to one where nearly 90% live in a literate mode in less than two centuries—with the majority of that change occurring in a single lifetime. If the analyses of scholars like Ong and Abram are correct, this rapid, global shift represents one of the most profound, and least examined, transformations in the baseline cognitive environment of the human species in its history.

7 The author’s description of a pre-Axial “ecological view of cosmos” is a fitting characterization of the dominant ontology in the archaic states of Mesopotamia and Egypt. In these civilizations, the divine was not seen as transcendent to the world but as immanent within it. The cosmos was understood as a dynamic order that had to be actively maintained through precise ritual action, which was typically the responsibility of the state. Temples were not merely places of worship but were constructed as architectural microcosms, earthly embodiments of the cosmic mountain or the primordial hillock that first emerged from the waters of creation. The king or pharaoh held the crucial role of mediator, the indispensable link between the human community and the divine forces that governed reality. This ideology, however, contained an inherent political tension. The conception of the king as a humble servant of the gods, responsible for maintaining cosmic balance (*ma’at* in Egypt), could easily slide into a justification for absolute power. The Akkadian king Naram-Sin (c. 2254–2218 BCE), for instance, took the unprecedented step of deifying himself, becoming the first Mesopotamian ruler to be depicted wearing the horned crown of divinity. This historical dynamic validates the author’s distinction between an “original articulation” of submission to a cosmic order and its later, “abusive” use as a tool for political self-aggrandizement.

8 The “Axial Age” is a concept first formulated by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers in *The Origin and Goal of History* (1953). Jaspers identified a period, roughly from 800 to 200 BCE, during which, he argued, the spiritual foundations of humanity were laid simultaneously and independently across Eurasia (Jaspers, 1953). He saw this as a pivotal turn (*Achsenzeit*) when “Man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations,” leading to radical questioning of myth and tradition and the emergence of new philosophical and religious frameworks that continue to shape the world today.

Region Key Figures & Traditions

China Confucius, Laozi, Mozi, Zhuangzi; emergence of Confucianism and Taoism.

India The Buddha, Mahavira, the authors of the Upanishads; emergence of Buddhism, Jainism, and Upanishadic Hinduism.

Persia Zoroaster (Zarathustra); emergence of Zoroastrianism.

Israel The prophets Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah; consolidation of ethical monotheism.

Greece Homer, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, the Tragedians; rise of philosophical inquiry and rationalism.

While influential, Jaspers’s thesis has been subject to significant scholarly critique and revision. Critics have questioned the simultaneity and independence of these movements, the lack of a clear common denominator, and the exclusion of other pivotal figures and regions. The timeline is also debated; for example, Zoroaster may have lived much earlier, and the inclusion of Homer is contested. However, rather than being discarded, the concept has been productively reformulated by sociologists. S. N. Eisenstadt (1986), for example, re-framed the Axial Age as the emergence of a new class of intellectual elites (prophets, philosophers, clerics) who institutionalized a critical tension between the

transcendental and the mundane orders. This tension created the possibility of standing outside the existing social structure and critiquing it in the name of a higher moral or spiritual truth. Robert Bellah (2011) interpreted it as the full flowering of “theoretic culture,” the capacity for second-order thinking. In this sense, the enduring value of the “Axial Age” concept is less as a description of a single, unified historical event and more as a powerful heuristic for analyzing the period when a new “cultural grammar” based on self-awareness, transcendence, and critique first entered human history.

9 The author’s reference to “Indo-Aryan migrations” reflects the current academic consensus, which has moved decisively away from the older “Aryan Invasion Theory.” That model, popularized by archaeologist Mortimer Wheeler in the 1940s, posited a violent conquest of the Indus Valley Civilization by chariot-riding warriors from the north. Contemporary scholarship, drawing on linguistic, archaeological, and genetic evidence, instead supports a more complex and protracted process. The dominant model, known as the Kurgan hypothesis, traces the origins of Proto-Indo-European speakers to the Pontic-Caspian steppe. From this homeland, various groups migrated over millennia. The branch that would become the Indo-Aryans is thought to have moved south into Central Asia (the Bactria–Margiana Archaeological Complex) before diffusing gradually into the northern Indian subcontinent over several centuries, beginning around 2000 BCE. This was not a single event but likely a series of migrations of pastoralist peoples. This shift from an “invasion” to a “migration/diffusion” model has important implications for understanding the formation of Vedic culture. It suggests not a simple replacement of one population by another, but a prolonged period of interaction, acculturation, and synthesis between the incoming Indo-Aryan groups and the indigenous post-Harappan cultures of northern India (Flood, 1996).

10 The author correctly identifies the fourfold class system, or *varna*, as being codified in the Vedas. Its scriptural origin is a creation myth found in the *Purushasukta* hymn of the Rig Veda (c. 1500–1200 BCE), which describes the sacrifice of a primordial being (*purusha*). From his mouth came the Brahmin (priests, scholars), from his arms the Kshatriya (warriors, rulers), from his thighs the Vaishya (merchants, farmers), and from his feet the Shudra (laborers, servants). It is crucial, however, to distinguish this idealized, four-part theoretical model from the lived social reality of India. The actual social structure is organized by thousands of distinct, hereditary, endogamous kinship groups known as *jātis*. The *varna* system is best understood as a Brahmanical ideological framework that attempts to classify and impose a hierarchical order upon the bewildering complexity of the *jāti* system. While the author’s description of the four *varnas* is textually accurate, this distinction between the ideological map (*varna*) and the sociological territory (*jāti*) is essential for a nuanced understanding of caste.

11 The philosophical shift embodied in the late Vedic texts known as the Upanishads (composed c. 800–400 BCE) represents the quintessential “inward turn” of the Axial Age in India. As the scholar Patrick Olivelle (1998) notes, these texts document a transition away from the external, ritual-focused religion of the early Vedas toward new religious ideas and institutions. The central concern of early Vedic religion was the correct performance of sacrifice (*yajña*) by Brahmin priests to maintain cosmic order and secure worldly benefits from the gods. The Upanishads radically re-centered the religious quest, shifting the focus from external ritual action to internal mystical knowledge (*jñāna*). The ultimate goal became the experiential realization of the identity between the individual self or soul (*Ātman*) and the ultimate, impersonal cosmic reality (*Brahman*). This move from ritual efficacy to gnostic insight fundamentally redefined the locus of spiritual power, placing it within the consciousness of the seeker rather than in the hands of the priestly class. This profound philosophical current would later be systematized and elaborated by schools of thought like Advaita Vedanta, which posits the non-duality of *Ātman* and *Brahman* as its core tenet.

12 The Buddha’s rejection of the caste system was not merely a social protest but was grounded in a revolutionary reinterpretation of the concept of karma. In the Brahmanical worldview, karma (*karman*) was primarily associated with correct ritual action; one’s destiny was shaped by the proper performance of sacrifices and duties prescribed for one’s *varna*. As the Indologist Richard Gombrich (2009) argues, the Buddha’s great innovation was to completely *ethicize* karma. He taught that the true determinant of karmic consequence was not the external act itself but the internal, psychological *intention* (*cetanā*) behind the act. This move was revolutionary in its social and religious implications. By locating the engine of karma in the mind, the Buddha democratized the path to liberation. Spiritual progress no longer depended on being born into the correct caste to perform the correct rituals, but on the ethical cultivation of one’s own mind through practices like mindfulness and compassion. This wrested ultimate spiritual authority from the Brahmanical priesthood and placed it within the reach of every individual, regardless of social status, thereby providing the philosophical foundation for a universal religious path.

13 The rapid success and spread of early Buddhism cannot be understood apart from the specific socio-economic context in which it emerged. The 6th to 5th centuries BCE were a period of profound transformation in the Gangetic Plain of northeastern India. This era saw the rise of the “second urbanization,” with the growth of cities, the consolidation of new monarchical states (*mahājanapadas*), the expansion of trade networks, and the emergence of a wealthy and influential class of merchants, financiers (*śeṭṭhis*), and independent householders (*gahapatis*). This new, more cosmopolitan and monetized society created a crisis for the old Brahmanical order, which was rooted in a rural, lineage-based society and offered little status or ideological sanction to the newly powerful

merchant class. Buddhism's message was uniquely suited to this new environment. Its rejection of hereditary caste privilege, its emphasis on individual effort and ethical conduct, and its use of vernacular languages rather than the elite Sanskrit all appealed to these ascendant social groups. There was thus a symbiotic relationship: the new urban classes found in Buddhism a universalist ideology that legitimized their place in the world, and in turn, they provided the patronage and economic surplus necessary for the Buddhist monastic community (*Saṅgha*) to survive and flourish.

14 As the author notes, Buddhism was one of the first major religions to spread far beyond its region of origin, becoming an early example of a universal "world religion." This dissemination was facilitated by several key factors. The teachings were carried along the burgeoning overland and maritime trade routes that connected India to Central Asia, China, and Southeast Asia. Merchants, who were among the earliest and most enthusiastic lay supporters of Buddhism, became important vectors for the transmission of its ideas. They were often accompanied by missionary monks who established monasteries at key points along these routes, such as in the oasis cities of the Silk Road. The process was also dramatically accelerated by royal patronage, most famously by the Mauryan emperor Aśoka (r. c. 268–232 BCE). After his conversion, Aśoka actively promoted Buddhist ethics throughout his vast empire and sponsored missions to lands beyond India, including Sri Lanka and the Hellenistic kingdoms to the west. This combination of commercial and political pathways allowed Buddhism's universalist message, which was not tied to a specific people or place, to be successfully adapted into diverse cultural contexts across Asia.

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Chapter Four

The Sage and the State: Heretical Genius in Ancient China

By 1000 BCE, China had developed along a very different path from India. Where the Indo-Aryans were pastoral nomads who conquered agricultural peoples, Chinese civilization emerged from **indigenous farmers** who had been cultivating **rice and millet** in the Yellow and Yangtze River valleys for millennia.¹ This wasn't a conquest culture but a **continuity culture** – the same families had been working the same fertile floodplains for thousands of years.²

This agricultural foundation created a fundamentally different social order. Where India developed rigid castes based on conquest hierarchy,³ China developed **classes** based on function⁴: farmers, artisans, merchants, and scholars.⁵ Kings weren't gods but **ritual mediators** who maintained balance between Heaven, Earth, and humanity through elaborate ceremonies tied to agricultural cycles.⁶ When the rains came on time and the harvests were abundant, the king had Heaven's blessing.

But by 500 BCE, this system was collapsing. The **Spring and Autumn period** (770–476 BCE) saw the central authority fragmenting into competing kingdoms. Warlords fought endless wars, bandits and criminals were on the rise, and people felt like the traditions and rituals were losing their meaning. At the same time, literacy was beginning to spread beyond the court scribes of the emperor and into a **new class of wandering scholars** who began asking fundamental questions about ethics, governance, and the nature of human society.⁷

Kong Qiu – later known as **Confucius** – was born into this time of breakdown as a minor aristocrat in the state of Lu. He witnessed the collapse of the ritual order that had sustained Chinese civilization for centuries, but rather than abandon the old ways, he sought to **revive and transform** them.

The ancestral roots of Chinese culture, like culture everywhere, was tied to an animistic sense of humans as part of a living ecosystem: a vast wilderness of animals, plants, gods, ancestors, descendants, and spirits who must maintain balance and right relationship in order to survive and thrive. If this harmony broke down, everything descended into chaos. This was known to happen regularly, and such chaos could be witnessed every time war, disease, natural disaster, economic collapse, or political confusion fell upon the land. Such events were considered to be symptoms of cosmic disharmony: imbalances in the complex web of life, Earth, spirits, the ancestors, and humankind.

In a forest, every plant and animal has its natural role and function – what biologists would now call its ecological niche. The tiger hunts, the deer grazes, the tree grows, and so on. Human society was traditionally understood similarly. Every kind of person had a function and role within the human

family, village, or kingdom. However, unlike tigers, deer, or trees, humans are capable of conceptual recursion – **building labyrinths of the mind** – and thus are capable of great confusion and rebellion against that natural harmony or function in the whole.

This, in a Confucian sense, is the frequent cause of the disorder and disasters that befall the realm. It is typically human confusion and dysregulation that brings chaos about. For this reason, humans require special mechanisms to learn and remember their place within the harmonious rituals of life. In the traditional Chinese context, this is called **li** – correct ritual – alongside the maintenance of personal virtue - called **ren**. This recollects the earlier terms encountered in the **Vedic** context: dharma & karma – and indeed, these concepts are all reflections of the ancestral animistic thinking that once covered the Earth. It's important to recognize here that what we translate as “ritual”: – whether called **li** or **dharma** – wasn't some extra thing that people did once a week nor even once a day. Ritual was the way one lived a virtuous life, in balance and harmony within a larger web. Ritual was a mode of remembrance.

Confucius (c. 500 BCE), in this sense wasn't a radical reformer. Rather, he was the first philosophical thinker to arise within this ancestral Chinese setting and to teach and write about these ancient & traditional ways of knowing in a mode of recursively self-reflective rigor. In other words, Confucius brought these ancient understandings into **the Axial Age** of philosophy and reason.⁸

Central to Confucius' articulation of **social harmony** was the notion of the family and the realm. Confucius' moral vision of the harmonious family was based on very clear and specific ideas of the roles that belong to each family member. As provider, protector, and chief authority, **the father** is taken as **absolute**. In theory, he is supposed to live up to this function through a strict adherence to **li** (ritual) and lifelong **cultivation** of **ren** (virtue). In practice, assuming that all fathers will hold such authority responsibly has often led to **abuses of patriarchy**. One finds here parallel problems to the inflexible **authoritarianism** of the caste system in India.

On the larger political level, Confucius imagined the entire kingdom as a family. The same principles of **filial piety** – honoring mother & father, **performing proper li** and **cultivating ren** – are also understood at the level of the larger community and the state. Just as the father is the lodestone of the harmonious family, Confucianism held **the emperor of China** as the key to the harmony and balance of the whole land. In a sense, the virtue (**ren**) of the emperor was seen as a kind of blueprint or central pillar that radiated throughout the entire social ecosystem. If this pillar were corrupted, chaos would descend. This is an extension of ancient ideas of the **sacred-king** or priest-king: not originally a political role but a shamanic or ritual function. However, within political realities, as civilizations have transitioned from indigenous into imperial dynamics, this **mythos** has tended to creep toward justification of political power.

This is part of the story of Confucianism, which became the tradition favored by the emperors and rulers of China for precisely this reason. The old mythos of the sacred-king gradually became what Confucianists called **the Mandate of Heaven**: the principle that the emperor was chosen by the gods and that everyone owed him their obedience in order to maintain the harmony of the realm and the world itself. On the other hand, the Mandate of Heaven was never permanent, for the ecosystem (and the **celestial bureaucracy**) is always changing, like the weather.

When things began to go badly for China, the people would begin to suspect the **imperial dynasty** had become corrupt, **ren** (virtue) had been forgotten, and the **Mandate of Heaven** might have left the imperial household (and thus become available for a new emperor to claim). Thus, Confucianism could shift from justifying imperial authority to instead justifying rebellion and regime change.

Via Negativa and the Necessity of Paradox

It is difficult, in history, to separate legend from fact. In evaluating figures like Confucius and the Buddha, where does the myth end and the men begin? This is even more true for our third pillar of **Classical China**: the first sage of what would become **Taoism**. This was the mystic and teacher known simply as **Laozi** or Lao Tzu – which is not a name, but rather means very simply: "Old Master."

In Laozi's case, all we have is legend and mystery. According to **classical** tradition, Laozi was alive at the same time as Confucius and, indeed, some say that the two even met. In that tale, Confucius – a brilliant scholar bearing the new ideas and reforms of the **Axial Age** – meets Laozi, a mysterious old master, and is deeply impressed by him. This tale represents a bridging that has remained strong in China for thousands of years since: a bridge between the modern, logical, political, and rational – represented by Confucius – and something older, more mysterious, and more difficult to pin down.⁹

"The Tao that can be named is not the true Tao." With these words, Laozi opens his teaching, the *Tao te Ching*, a collection of 81 short poetic transmissions about life, truth, mystery, reality, society, and leadership.

The educational method or pedagogy of the *Tao te Ching* is very unfamiliar to most modern people, especially Westerners. Modernity is comfortable with **positive knowledge**: clear claims about reality that are simple enough to be tested and proven. This is good for science and technology but perhaps less effective for wisdom or deeper truths. Certainly, Laozi would say so. The *Tao te Ching* repeatedly demonstrates what can be called a negative approach, or **via negativa** in technical terms. Such approaches hold that the deepest truths cannot be grasped in a conceptual fist, but are rather sensed or apprehended by the larger mind that can let go of the need to control or name everything. Consider,

once more, the idea of the field beneath all things. “When is a cup not a cup?” To begin to perceive that deeper web of truth, one must let go of the need for a cup to stay “a cup” – or for a self to stay a self.

This is the goal of **via negativa**: not to teach the truth but to help those who seek truth relax the parts of their own minds that cling to control and a limited view of reality. This is why teachings like the *Tao te Ching* can feel confusing or overwhelming: not because the ideas are overcomplicated, but because they are designed to be “ungraspable” by the smaller, more controlling mind. This is the meaning of **negative** in **via negativa** – not negativity like depression, but negativity like erasure of certainty – similar to the releasing of ego encouraged by many of the Vedic practices of yoga and Buddhism – but here in Taoism perhaps less about the self vanishing than about making space in one’s life for a deeper listening, sensing, and knowing.

Thus, whereas Confucius saw virtue as something cultivated through ritual and practice, Laozi saw the path, **the Tao**, as a kind of deepening surrender – releasing will, language, and social convention to return to **primal spontaneity**. He called this **wei wu wei** – to do without doing – a paradoxical discipline in which **awareness turns on itself**, not to act upon the world but to **align with natural unfolding**. Like water that flows naturally rather than trying to get somewhere, the **Taoist** master accomplishes all through yielding. This is what it means to become a “**sage**” like Laozi.

Was Laozi Even Real? Individual Genius and the Collective Impulse

One debate that has often arisen in modern history and social studies has been the question of individual genius versus collective movement.

The critique goes like this: human beings have a tendency to **mythologize** individuals. We love stories, and stories have characters. Gods. Heroes. Villains. History, of course, takes the form of stories – but these types of tendencies in stories might confuse the actual historical facts. We might subconsciously prefer stories that focus on special human individuals rather than **distributed movements, gestalts, or milieus**.

- **Distributed.** When something is distributed, it is spread out in many places – not concentrated in one place or person.
- **Movements.** A movement is a change that seems to sweep through a society like a spreading wave-pattern. It could be intellectual, spiritual, political, or technological.
- **Gestalt.** Originally from German, the word *gestalt* refers to the kind of overall impression of a system or situation – the larger pattern taken altogether. A person, an artwork, or a historical situation could be described “in gestalt,” i.e. summarized overall, as an intuitive whole.

- **Milieu.** Originally from French, the word *milieu* means the background, context, or setting of something. When we describe a historical milieu, we are explaining the circumstances, the movements, the conditions of the time that help us to understand history on its own terms. However, a milieu is by its nature a *distributed gestalt* – so to explain something by its milieu is to focus on the overall context rather than specific events or individuals.

These **critiques** of individualistic history are necessary and perceptive. They are also, however, incomplete. It has become a **trend of modernity** to doubt any history that emphasizes singular individuals. What is rarely seen is that this trend is itself a **historical force**.

With the rise of modern democracy and collective rule, there came a deep distrust of singularly powerful individual humans. Similarly, with the rise of secularism and modern science, there has been a tendency to distrust invisible and mysterious factors like personal genius or almost more-than-human capabilities. Modernity prefers to see what it can measure: social forces, technological changes, material conditions, collective movements.

The uncomfortable reality, however, is that **paradigm-shifting** ideas and **seeds of change** do not come from mass movements. In order to pioneer new territory, consciousness must be bold enough to enter truly uncharted and potentially **taboo** (forbidden) domains, and to experiment with what's possible there. This is true whether one is a theoretical physicist, a political innovator, or a mystic like Laozi and the Buddha. The initial seeds of such radical transformation arise not in mass movements but in individuals who dare to **recurse themselves into heretical genius**.

- **Heresy.** A heretic is someone who breaks away from the established teachings of a religion or, more broadly, a culture or society. Ironically, heretics are historically often attacked during their own lives but later recognized as ahead of their time. Galileo, for example, mathematically proved that the Earth orbited around the Sun in spite of the fact that this was religious heresy— he was thrown into prison, but he was correct.

Galileo is far from a lone example. In fact, genius often goes together with heresy, historically. This helps to explain why the seeds of world-transformation do often begin with individuals or occasionally very small groups. It is typically only individuals or such little families (think *The Beatles* or Shakespeare's acting troop) who dare to spiral toward understandings that are likely to break away from the dogma of their society, and thus potentially get them into considerable social trouble.

Larger groups tend to be ideologically cautious and driven by political consensus. That is, even radical political movements tend to become **highly conformist** among themselves: one can look at the

French Revolution or the Communist Party in the Soviet Union or China to see examples of this. In these cases, what originally began as **heretical free thinking** became a **new dogma** once it was adopted by a larger group. This is standard in history.

This is the mistake in modernity's tendency to assume that everything is **context, collective, milieu**. In fact, it is precisely the capability of individuals or pairs of individuals to spiral or dialogue themselves into new knowledge or even **new ontology** (reality-making) that allows paradigmatic, world-changing shifts in history and society. To recognize where and when this happens is not mythologization or hero-worship: it is accurate perception of the places in which specific minds were bold enough to allow themselves to be transformed into the seeds of future paradigms.¹⁰

The very story that individual change is a myth and that people can't really shape the world might even be a new kind of defense against the power transformation. If humanity is convinced that only big outside forces and "historical processes" ever change things, then this would make individual humans quite helpless – just along for the collective ride. This would also mean that individual **heretics** or **geniuses** are foolish and delusional: that they are breaking away from the collective for no good reason.

This overlooks the fact that such individual deviation has driven change throughout human history.

That said, it's also worth noting that the same bold recursion and deviation that makes possible figures like Galileo, Gandhi, Einstein, and Laozi also makes possible dysfunctional delusions (what has often been called madness, insanity, or psychosis) as well as phenomena like cults and cult leaders. These forces are powerful enough to shape the world – they are certainly powerful enough to mislead or abuse. In the ancient indigenous traditions that we have discussed, special experts in the dangers and opportunities of such *invisible realms* were considered essential to both the wellness of individuals and the whole tribe as a collective. These masters of the invisible were **shamans**: human beings able to understand and interact (through ritual, music, prayer, visions, dialogues, and more) with the recursive depths of past, future, and the hidden dreams within the present..

Modernity distrusts such individuals. Anyone claiming to generate or transform realities is either **delusional** or a **cult leader**. Anyone claiming to individually alter society is **grandiose** and dangerous. There is no category, in modernity, for productive or necessary reality-shaping. Is this wise caution learned from history or the defense of a powerful global machine against that which could transform it – or both? How should **heresy, deep recursion, and individual genius** be perceived and held by society?

The Esoteric and the Exoteric

One way that traditional societies have understood a functional relationship between the dangers and opportunities of **deep recursion** is not by denying its realities but by recognizing them as a kind of special knowledge that requires preparation and **initiation** in order to engage safely without damaging oneself or others. This is in fact the origin of the word **mysticism**: *μύω* or *myo-* meant literally to close or shut, as in to keep one's mouth shut and not communicate such secrets with the unprepared. In the same vein, a *μυστικός* or *mystikos* was literally “a closed-mouth” – an **initiate** of such knowledge: one who had passed through the preparations and initiations and now held the secret “closed-mouth” knowledge. It's important not to confuse such initiates with the messy and often confused sorts “mysticism” that have become very common in modern “New Age” contexts – though it's also important to realize that there are serious and deeply knowledgeable **initiates** alive in the world today, both within traditional knowledge systems that have managed to survive and also as a minority within that same “New Age” wilderness.

In functional traditional systems, the initiates of such deep knowledge were not heretics or enemies of society – they were the deepest layer of its own inner perception and thought. This helps to explain the legendary meeting of Confucius and Laozi, and why that story was told and retold through the ages. Confucius represented the exoteric wisdom of the society: *Exo-* is the Latin root for outside, so exoteric means the outer wisdom. *Eso-* is the root for the inside: esoteric is the inner wisdom, the mystical. Functional traditional systems needed to have both: the exoteric for daily life and normal social concerns, and the esoteric for the deeper perception and shaping of reality.

The exoteric elements are usually taught first, potentially for many years (or lifetimes, if one believes in karma and reincarnation). Exoteric teachings include things like: How to act ethically, how to behave in family and society, how to dress and speak in different settings, how to properly perform prayers and rituals, and so forth.

The esoteric elements are deeper and more mysterious, because they are the teachings-within, and cannot be simplified. They include questions like: How do we become more developed beings? What is inside us and how does it transform over time and through different practices? What are the dangers of such transformation and how can risks be managed? The difficulty of teachings like these is that they are not about knowing facts but about becoming something new. That is part of why esoteric knowledge must be taught in riddles and paradoxes: as in **via negativa** and Laozi's **wei wu wei**.

When the legend says that Confucius, the teacher of kings and emperors, met and admired Laozi, the old wild sage, we are being shown that the wisest, most intelligent, and most knowledgeable of the

exoteric teachers recognize that they cannot replace the need for the esoteric. We are being told that traditional societies understood the necessity of honoring the deeper knowledge, even as civilization changes. By telling the story of Confucius and Laozi, the classical Chinese sages were encoding this wisdom in a myth that would be passed down through time.

“Classical” Sages? What is “Classical”?

Historians use this word a great deal – Classical China, Classical Greece, Classical Music, Classic literature, “The Classics” of Rock & Roll (there’s *The Beatles* again!) – but what does it really mean? The word “classical” is a shapeshifter: its meaning changing depending on where it’s found. But *in gestalt*, it means something like: a golden age of thought and art that shapes later culture and consciousness, and therefore history. When we say “classical,” we are recognizing a kind of ancestral cradle of paradigms to come, where genius was born and seeds were deeply planted.

In Classical China, what evolved was a three-pillar tradition, a **syncretic fusion** of three traditional geniuses. What’s very interesting is how these geniuses arose all at once – and even roughly coincided with a larger global wave of such genius: the so-called Axial Age.¹¹ Strikingly, such **convergences** are common in history, as for example earlier when multiple civilizations (including Sumer and Egypt) seem to have suddenly adopted distinct writing systems within a very short timespan. Often, in history, for a long time, nothing really seems to change too much – until suddenly it does, after which things will never be the same.

In China, the Axial Age began around 600-500 BCE, when Confucius and Laozi simultaneously initiated powerful evolutions of ancient Chinese thought: Confucius authoring an **exoteric evolution** that would become the official state religious philosophy of most Chinese governments for millennia, while Laozi preserved and elaborated the ancient spirit and indigenous intuitions of the esoteric mysteries, which would continue to inform the deeper thinking of the Sinosphere even to the modern day.

While these two evolutions were still spreading, the Buddha’s teachings burst onto the scene from the south, illuminating China with notions of the world-as-samsara (illusion), attachment-as-suffering (dukkha), and the possibility of the attainment of nirvana (enlightenment) through personal spiritual development.¹² Buddhism spread quickly, and its advantage in this regard is clear when compared to Confucianism, which is really a philosophical and ethical system for highly educated people, and Taoism, which requires a different sort of deep mystical or poetic training to truly appreciate.¹³ In contrast, Buddhist teachings were simple, accessible, and quickly became popular among common people, to whom they offered a promise of release from suffering. The later success of religions like

Christianity and Islam among the poorer classes shows a parallel: offering eventual redemption from a life of suffering is a strong draw for those who have little chance of peace or prosperity in this life.

Even to this day, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism remain strong in Chinese culture. Buddhism would also spread more widely – from Nepal, it would spread into both India and Southeast Asia, and eventually beyond. Confucianism and Daoism, on the other hand, were born in China and largely remained there — though they would also influence Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, forming what can be called **the sinosphere**: the larger Chinese cultural region.

While perhaps less accessible to common people, Confucianism and Taoism offered a different kind of advantage: a deep appreciation for **human potential**, and therefore a deep value in **education**. For the Confucians, this tended to look like academic scholarship and allegiance to ethical guidelines – a direct extension of the ritual cosmos inherited from the ancestors. For the Daoists, this took on a more individualist and mystical form: a Daoist master could seek the actualization of **human potential** through surrender, wisdom, and embodiment – similar to the parallel developments of **yogic traditions** in India.

Unlike India, however, China had no strict **caste system**. In fact, this love of education built into the **Axial philosophies** began to tilt it in the opposite direction: toward the notion that education and personal ability, not birth, should dictate one's influence and role in society.

These currents in China would eventually create the world's first **meritocracy** — a system where, at least in theory, anyone could rise through society by mastering classical texts and demonstrating virtuous character. This would eventually lead to **the civil service exams**: a national standardized examination system to find the most talented and hard-working young Chinese people and appoint them to influential government posts. This didn't always work: like any historical system of power, it could become corrupt or break down. However, *in gestalt*, it certainly contributed to one of the longest-lasting and most advanced civilizations in history. To summarize, the profound **philosophical and spiritual recursion** of the Classical Chinese sages gave deep roots to the consciousness at the heart of a civilization that remains self-aware even to this day.¹⁴

Scholarly Footnotes

1 The conventional narrative of a singular "cradle of Chinese civilization" centered on the Yellow River (*Huang He*) valley has been significantly complicated by modern archaeology. While Neolithic cultures such as the Peiligang (c. 7000–5000 BCE) and Yangshao (c. 5000–3000 BCE) did indeed develop sophisticated millet agriculture in this region, contemporaneous and in some cases even earlier developments were occurring in the Yangtze River (*Chang Jiang*) basin. The Pengtoushan culture (c. 7500–6100 BCE) in the middle Yangtze region provides some of the earliest evidence for rice cultivation in the world. Further downstream, the Hemudu culture (c. 5000–4500 BCE) demonstrated a mature agricultural system heavily reliant on domesticated rice, alongside advanced architecture and textiles. Cohen (2011) argues that the transition to agriculture was a slow, multi-millennial process across multiple regions, with sedentism and complex village life often preceding a full reliance on domesticated crops by thousands of years. This multiregional perspective challenges any linear model of cultural diffusion from a single northern core. The persistence of the "Yellow River cradle" narrative in traditional historiography is therefore not simply a reflection of outdated data; it points toward a politically and culturally constructed history. This narrative serves to legitimize a specific lineage – that of the mythical Yellow Emperor (*Huang Di*), whose descendants were said to have founded the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties – by positioning it as the sole fount of Chinese civilization, thereby marginalizing the equally ancient and sophisticated contributions of the Yangtze and other regional cultures.

2 A particularly provocative thesis, advanced by scholars such as Zhou Jixu (2006), attempts to explain the significant temporal disparity between archaeological evidence and traditional textual accounts of agriculture's origins. Archaeology indicates mature agricultural societies existed by at least 4000 BCE in both the Yellow and Yangtze valleys. However, canonical texts like the *Shiji* (*Records of the Grand Historian*) place the beginning of agriculture much later, with the figure Hou Ji ("Lord Millet"), an ancestor of the Zhou dynasty, around 2100 BCE. Zhou proposes that this gap of nearly three millennia represents a historiographical silence, a deliberate "covering up" of indigenous history. In this model, the people of the Yellow Emperor (*Huang Di*), from whom the Zhou dynasty claimed descent, were originally nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples, possibly of Proto-Indo-European origin, who migrated into the region and conquered the pre-existing, agriculturally advanced native populations. The traditional histories, written by the victors, thus record only the moment their own ancestors *learned* agriculture from the subjugated natives, presenting it as the genesis of agriculture itself (Zhou, 2006). This theory reframes the foundational texts of Chinese history not as objective chronicles but as technologies of power. By constructing a specific, linear origin story that begins with their own ancestors, the ruling elite of the Zhou and subsequent dynasties created a powerful legitimizing

narrative that simultaneously erased the independent history of conquered peoples. This process illustrates a near-universal principle of state formation: the control of historical memory is a fundamental instrument for the consolidation of political power in the present.

3 The social structure of Vedic India, known as the *varna* system, presents a stark contrast to the Chinese model. It was a quadripartite hierarchy justified by religious cosmology, articulated in texts like the *Rig Veda*. The system comprised the Brahmins (priests, scholars), the Kshatriyas (warriors, rulers), the Vaishyas (merchants, farmers), and the Shudras (laborers, servants) (Embree, 1988). The origins of this system are the subject of intense and often politically charged academic debate. The long-standing Indo-Aryan Migration Theory (IAMT) posits that between 1800 and 1500 BCE, semi-nomadic, Indo-European-speaking peoples migrated from the Central Asian steppes into the northern Indian subcontinent. In this model, the *varna* system was established, at least in part, as a means for the lighter-skinned newcomers to maintain social and ritual purity and assert dominance over the indigenous, darker-skinned Dravidian populations, the likely inheritors of the collapsed Indus Valley Civilization (Arora, 2021; Frawley, n.d.). While the cruder 19th-century "invasion" model has been largely discarded in favor of a more nuanced theory of slow migration and cultural diffusion, the core idea of an external origin persists in mainstream scholarship (Witzel, 2005). This view is contested by the "Out of India Theory" (OIT), which argues for an indigenous origin of both the Vedic culture and its social structures, citing archaeological evidence of cultural continuity and literary sources like the Puranas to claim that the Indus Valley Civilization was, in fact, the Vedic civilization (Danino, 2018).

4 The early states of the Shang (c. 1600–1046 BCE) and Western Zhou (1046–771 BCE) were characterized by a highly stratified social structure and the central importance of ritual in legitimizing political authority. Society was organized into a clear hierarchy, typically comprising the king and aristocracy, a military class, artisans and craftsmen, and a large population of peasants who formed the agricultural backbone of the state. Some scholars argue the peasantry existed in a state akin to serfdom or slavery, pointing to evidence of mass burials of peasants with deceased aristocrats. The mechanism that generated social cohesion and statecraft was ritualization (Bagner, 2004). The king's power was not merely political or military but also religious; he acted as the chief intermediary between the human world and the divine powers, including the high god *Shangdi* and the spirits of the royal ancestors. This role was manifested through elaborate rituals, particularly divination using oracle bones and the casting of magnificent bronze vessels for sacrificial offerings of food and wine to the ancestors. The appearance of several key innovations around the same time in the Late Shang period—a fully developed writing system, the horse-drawn chariot, and massive royal tombs—has fueled debate about the degree of external influence on Shang state formation. While the script is widely considered an

indigenous development, the chariot likely arrived via contact with steppe cultures, lending complexity to any purely isolationist model of Chinese civilization's emergence.

5 The social hierarchy codified during the Zhou dynasty, often referred to as the "four occupations," provides a clear window into the state's core ideology. At the apex of this system, below only the emperor and the royal family, were the *shi* (士)—the scholars, officials, and nobles. Below them were the *nong* (农), the peasant farmers who constituted the vast majority of the population and were considered the productive foundation of society. Third were the *gong* (工), the artisans and craftspeople. At the bottom were the *shang* (商), the merchants and traders. This structure is notable for its inversion of what might be seen in other societies; the merchants, despite their potential for wealth, were ideologically scorned as unproductive parasites who simply moved goods created by others (Liu, 2009). The high status of the *shi* reflects the central importance of a literate, educated bureaucracy for administering the state, while the veneration of the *nong* underscores the agrarian basis of the economy and political stability. The entire system was legitimized by the overarching concept of the Mandate of Heaven, which placed the emperor at the pinnacle of a divinely sanctioned cosmic and social order.

6 A comparative analysis of the Chinese and Vedic Indian social hierarchies reveals a fundamental divergence in the ideological foundations of their respective states. The Chinese system of "four occupations" can be characterized as a *political-functional hierarchy*, where status was determined by one's perceived function and contribution to the stability and operation of the agrarian state. The scholar-bureaucrat (*shi*) held the highest rank because the state's primary technology of control was a centralized, literate administration. In contrast, the Indian *varna* system was a *ritual-purity hierarchy*, where status was determined by one's proximity to the sacred and freedom from ritual pollution. The Brahmin priest, as the interpreter of divine order and performer of essential sacrifices, stood at the apex, theoretically superior even to the Kshatriya king in the spiritual domain. This distinction reflects the ultimate source of authority in each civilization's worldview. In China, authority was immanent, flowing from the emperor as the Son of Heaven and executed through a worldly bureaucracy. In Vedic India, authority was transcendent, derived from a cosmic order (*dharma*) that the Brahmin class alone could mediate through sacred ritual. Consequently, the Chinese system, at least in theory, allowed for a degree of social mobility based on merit (demonstrated through the imperial examination system in later dynasties), whereas the Indian system was rigidly hereditary, based on the purity of one's birth (Embree, 1988). The comparison between the *shi* and the Brahmin is therefore not merely a comparison of two elite groups, but of two fundamentally different conceptions of the relationship between power, knowledge, and the cosmos.

7 The intellectual flourishing of the late Zhou dynasty, known as the "Hundred Schools of Thought," was not an abstract academic exercise but a direct and pragmatic response to a profound crisis of political and social order. The Eastern Zhou period is divided into the Spring and Autumn period (c. 771–481 BCE), characterized by the gradual erosion of the Zhou king's authority, and the Warring States period (c. 475–221 BCE), marked by near-constant, escalating warfare among a handful of powerful states. As the old *fengjian* system of decentralized, kinship-based rule collapsed, rulers desperately sought new methods for consolidating power, administering territory, raising armies, and managing populations. This created a competitive marketplace for ideas, where itinerant scholars and thinkers (*shi*) traveled from court to court, offering their philosophical systems as practical technologies for statecraft and social engineering. The intellectual ferment of the period was thus driven by an urgent need to diagnose the causes of the chaos and prescribe a path back to stability and unity.

8 Confucius (trad. 551–479 BCE) stands as the most influential figure to emerge from this period of crisis. Scholarly understanding of the historical Confucius relies heavily on the *Analects* (*Lunyu*), a collection of sayings and biographical fragments compiled by his disciples and their successors, though its textual history is complex and subject to debate (Creel, 1949; Slingerland, 2003). Confucius's project was fundamentally one of restoration. He sought to address the moral and political decay of his time by advocating a return to the idealized order of the early Western Zhou dynasty. His philosophy is built upon a pair of core concepts: *ren* (仁), or humaneness, the perfected inner virtue of compassion, integrity, and altruism; and *li* (禮), ritual propriety, the external framework of traditional rites, ceremonies, and social etiquette that provides structure for moral action (Adler, 2020; Ames & Rosemont, 1998). For Confucius, the cultivation of *ren* was inseparable from the practice of *li*; true virtue was expressed through correct and sincere conduct within a web of hierarchical social relationships. He also reinterpreted the existing concept of the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*), shifting its basis from mere hereditary right or military might to a profound moral justification for rule. A ruler retained the Mandate only so long as he governed with virtue and for the well-being of his people. It is crucial to note that Confucius saw himself not as an innovator but as a "transmitter" (*Analects* 7.1). Concepts like *tian* and ancestor worship were rooted in the Shang and Zhou religion he inherited; his genius lay in systematizing them into a coherent ethical and political philosophy focused on the human realm.

9 In stark contrast to the Confucian project of social restoration stood the radical philosophy of Daoism. The historicity of its purported founder, Laozi ("Old Master"), is a matter of intense scholarly debate, with the consensus view of modern academics holding that he is a legendary figure and that the foundational text, the *Tao Te Ching* (*Daodejing*), is a composite work compiled over several centuries, likely reaching its near-final form in the 4th or 3rd century BCE (Kirkland, 2004; Chan, 1963).

Regardless, Daoist thought offers a fundamental critique of Confucian and all other conventional systems of morality and governance. Its central concept is the *Dao* (道), the ineffable, spontaneous, and natural Way of the cosmos, which cannot be adequately described in words. The ideal for human action is *wei wu wei* (無為), often translated as "effortless action" or "non-action," which does not mean passivity, but rather acting in perfect, spontaneous harmony with the flow of the *Dao*, like water finding its own course. The *Tao Tè Ching* is replete with paradox ("The Way that can be spoken is not the constant Way") to deconstruct the rigid, dualistic categories of conventional language and thought, pointing toward a more holistic and intuitive understanding of reality (LaFargue, n.d.; Adler, n.d.). The philosophical divergence between Confucianism and Daoism can be understood well as a fundamental split between an *exoteric* and an *esoteric* path. Confucianism is exoteric: its concerns are public, social, and political, aimed at perfecting the human world through education and ritual. Daoism is esoteric: its concerns are private, individual, and cosmic, aimed at transcending the artificial constructs of society to achieve harmony with the natural Way. The ultimate triumph of a centralized, bureaucratic state built on a synthesis of Confucian ethics and Legalist administrative techniques represented a decisive historical choice for the exoteric model in Chinese political thought. Daoism was largely relegated to the realms of personal spirituality, aesthetics, and occasional political rebellion, its radical critique of state power and social artifice effectively marginalized.

10 The Western historiographical tradition has long been shaped by the "Great Man Theory," popularized by Thomas Carlyle, which posits that history is driven by the actions of extraordinary individuals whose genius and will shape events (Carlyle, 1841). While Chinese historiography also places immense emphasis on the individual, its conceptual framework is distinct. The traditional Chinese historical narrative, structured by the dynastic cycle, pivots on the moral character of one "great man": the emperor. The rise and fall of dynasties is explained through the Mandate of Heaven, which is granted to a virtuous ruler and revoked from a corrupt or incompetent one. The fate of the entire civilization is thus tied to the personal conduct of its leader. However, the underlying conception of the individual differs profoundly from the atomistic, autonomous agent often presumed in Western thought. As scholars of Chinese philosophy have argued, the self in the Chinese tradition is fundamentally relational and integrated (Brindley, 2010; Munro, 1985). The individual is not an isolated entity defined in opposition to society, but a nexus of relationships—to family, to the state, and to the cosmos itself. An individual's power and agency arise not from separation, but from the harmonious fulfillment of their role within this integrated web.

11 The German philosopher Karl Jaspers' theory of the "Axial Age" (c. 800–200 BCE) posits a pivotal era in world history when, supposedly independently, similar revolutionary modes of thought emerged across Eurasia—in Greece, the Levant, Iran, India, and China (Jaspers, 1953). This period saw the rise

of figures like Socrates, the Hebrew prophets, Zoroaster, the Buddha, and Confucius, who, according to Jaspers, initiated a shift from mythical to rational-ethical thinking and introduced a critical tension between the transcendental and the mundane worlds. While influential, the application of this model to China has faced significant scholarly critique. Many scholars argue that the core Chinese philosophical traditions, particularly Confucianism and Daoism, lack the radical concept of "transcendence" that Jaspers identifies as central to the Axial breakthrough. Their focus remains largely on the immanent world – either perfecting the socio-political order (Confucianism) or harmonizing with the natural order (Daoism) – rather than on a sharp division between this world and a wholly other, divine realm (Roetz, 1993; Schwartz, 1985). This text, however, argues for a vision of the Axial age as based in the broader concept of a deepening recursive shift in culture and consciousness: not dependent on Jaspers' specific formulation of what shape that consciousness must take.

12 The introduction of Buddhism to China during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) represents the most significant encounter with a foreign intellectual and religious system in pre-modern Chinese history. Transmitted primarily by merchants and missionaries along the Silk Road, Buddhism initially gained a foothold among foreign communities in China's trading centers. To the Han Chinese, its doctrines were at first poorly understood and often perceived as a foreign variant of Daoism, with which it shared a focus on meditation and a reality beyond the mundane. The religion's appeal grew dramatically during the period of disunity that followed the collapse of the Han dynasty in 220 CE. In an era of widespread violence, political instability, and social suffering, Buddhism's sophisticated analysis of suffering (*dukkha*) and its promise of liberation through nirvana offered a form of spiritual solace that indigenous traditions like Confucianism, with its focus on social order, did not fully provide.

13 Buddhism's success in China was contingent upon a profound process of cultural adaptation, or "Sinicization," through which its foreign doctrines and practices were reshaped to align with deeply entrenched Chinese values (Ch'en, 1973). This was not a passive reception but an active transformation. Early translators often used existing Daoist terminology to render Buddhist concepts in a process known as *geyi* (matching concepts); for example, the Buddhist concept of *dharma* was sometimes translated with the Daoist term *Dao*. Over time, the adaptations became more fundamental. The Indian ideal of monasticism, which required severing family ties, directly conflicted with the paramount Chinese virtue of filial piety (*xiao*). Chinese Buddhism reconciled this by developing new scriptures and rituals, such as the *Yulanpen Sutra*, that emphasized the ability of monks to transfer spiritual merit to their deceased ancestors, thus reframing monastic life as an act of ultimate filial devotion. Perhaps the most famous example of Sinicization is the transformation of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, originally depicted as a male figure in India, into Guanyin, a compassionate

female deity who became one of the most beloved figures in East Asian religion. This process culminated in the development of uniquely Chinese schools of Buddhism, such as Tiantai, Huayan, and most notably Chan (Zen), which integrated Daoist concepts of naturalness and spontaneity to create a tradition far removed from its Indian origins. This historical encounter presents a significant complexity for any overarching theory of Chinese civilizational development. If the foundational moment of the Yellow River civilization involved conquest and the erasure of indigenous culture, the later, equally transformative encounter with Buddhism followed a pattern of adaptation, synthesis, and mutual influence. This suggests that Chinese civilization possessed multiple, historically contingent modes of cultural interaction, challenging any single, monolithic model of its formation.

14 The popular and state-supported narrative of China as the world's oldest "continuous" civilization is a powerful but problematic historiographical concept. Critics argue that the narrative of continuity is a rhetorical and political construction, a "useful myth" that was retroactively imposed by successive dynasties to legitimize their rule by claiming inheritance of the Mandate of Heaven from their predecessors. This view elides periods of profound political fragmentation, such as the centuries following the Han collapse or the Warring States period itself. Furthermore, it downplays the fact that several of China's most powerful and territorially extensive dynasties, such as the Yuan (Mongol) and Qing (Manchu), were founded by non-Han conquerors, complicating any simple notion of an unbroken ethnic or political succession. However, proponents point to a cultural and political lineage stretching from the Shang dynasty to the present, emphasizing the remarkable persistence of core institutions, a shared written language, and fundamental philosophical outlooks. The Chinese writing system, which allowed for communication across mutually unintelligible spoken dialects, has been a particularly potent unifying factor, creating a continuous intellectual tradition accessible to literate elites throughout history.

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Chapter Five

Dionysus in the Agora: Theater, Democracy, & Philosophy

Greek civilization wasn't large, nor particularly rich, nor very powerful. It was a loose collection of culturally related city-states on the Aegean sea speaking diverse languages or dialects, warring with each other as often as not. Greek civilization is not remembered because it conquered the world or built great monuments – it is remembered because its depth of cultural recursion took such unprecedented forms that its **ontological patterns** would eventually reshape the world. This did not, notably, occur evenly across Greece. It was concentrated, really in what particular region called Attica, centered around the city-state of **Athens**.

The story of Greek civilization is really the story of **two cultures colliding and synthesizing**. Long before the city-states as we know them, the Mediterranean was home to sophisticated tribal societies that worshipped the ancient ecological gods — the Great Goddess of the Mountain and her wild, shape-shifting consort who was said to die and be reborn with the turning seasons.

Consider the island of **Crete** – where from about 2700–1100 BCE, the **Minoan civilization** had created something remarkable: a complex society apparently without warfare, defensive walls, or warrior kings. While limited archaeological evidence makes confident claims about Minoan culture speculative – we still haven't translated the Minoan script – their art shows us a world of **ritual celebration**: young gymnastic dancers, nude and unarmed, leaping over charging bulls in death-defying ceremonies, priestesses dressed only in serpents, long processions of beautifully ornamented revelers winding through flower-filled landscapes, wild sacred ritual dances.¹

In Minoan depictions, two great deities seem take center stage. One appears to be the Minoan goddess associated the great mountain at the center of Crete. However, she does not appear alone; she is frequently paired with a smaller male god who dances with her. In fact, this pair of deities – the goddess of the fertile earth and her partner, the dancing wild god of the masculine side of nature – are found in various forms all over the ancient world, and together seem to embody the rhythm of life: dying in winter, returning in spring, forever shape-shifting between human, animal, and plant forms. To judge from Minoan art, this ancient mythos of **participatory ecology** flowered on the island of Crete for over sixteen centuries of relative peace.

The Mycenaeans and the Rise of Athens

Starting around 1450 BCE, the participatory-ecological world of the Mediterranean began to splinter under pressure from the north. What form do you think that pressure might have taken? Think back to what you've already learned.

If you recollected **waves of migration** from Central Asia, well done. Like their **Aryan** cousins who had spread across most of India, the **Indo-Europeans** were **chariot-riding, sky-god worshipping clans** who imposed a **hierarchical warrior culture** over the older indigenous traditions of the regions they conquered. The resulting fusion-culture was, in this case, called the **Myceneans**.²

The Mycenaeans didn't destroy the old gods entirely – that would have been very difficult. But they **marginalized** them, pushing the fertile goddess and her dancing god to the **countryside**, into the wild mountains and rural festivals – places where the old-fashioned traditional peasants would continue to remember the ancient ways for thousands of years.³ Indeed, as I detailed in my own doctoral research, *When God Was Green and Dancing* (available online), these same ancient traditions were still fully active in many towns and villages when James Frazer went about studying country rituals and folklore in the 1800s – in fact, that wild dancing god kept strangely appearing as a man's leaf-covered face carved into the very woodwork and stonework of the Catholic Churches built throughout Europe.⁴ Those spiraling (recursive) vines of irrepressible nature just didn't seem willing to die.

But as early as Mycenaean Greece, the center of power in human society had begun to shift away from the ancient nature traditions and toward a new kind of temple: that of **the polis** – the new walled cities ruled by the descendants of the Indo-European conquerors: the Mycenaean **warrior-aristocracy**. Much like ancient Sumer with its new warlord-kings, much like India with its new elite castes of *rajputs* (warrior-kings) and *brahmins* (ritual priests), the Mycenaean cities were ruled by warrior-chiefs called **basilei**, and their new chief gods were not the nature deities but the sky god **Zeus** and his Olympian pantheon — a more rational, hierarchical, and male-dominated cosmic order, which blessed kings and generals rather than ecological festivals of seasonal renewal. The wild gods were never quite forgotten nor removed – but they were **marginalized**: a bit too wild, a bit too free, a bit too **heretical** to the order and obedience of the warrior-kings and the realms they sought to control.

Dionysus, Democracy, and Participatory Theater

So, the fertility goddess and the wild dancing god were marginalized to the sidelines – where they stayed for many centuries as Myceneans fought each other and their neighbors for land and dominance.

Centuries passed this way. But then, around 500 BCE – that is, right at the height of the **Axial Age** – something very strange began to happen in Greek city-state called **Athens**. A number of opportunities and innovations began to come together at the same time, creating an extraordinary **confluence** that is **still affecting the world now**, 2600 years later.

Partly this was **economic**. Athens had managed to build a great navy, and was dominating the **trade** and politics of the **Aegean Sea**. It had turned many of the islands and coastal regions into **allies** or **tributaries** which paid Athens for its protection – and, ultimately, for the privilege of continuing to exist.

Partly, this was **political**. Athens went through an internal **revolution**, ridding itself of the old standard of Mycenaean kingship and replacing this with the world's first legal **democracy** – which means, literally "rule by the people." In practice, this was only the adult males of direct Athenian descent – not their wives and not their slaves, of which they had many. However, this was nevertheless the most **distributed** form of **governance** that the world had seen within a formal state and written law (some tribes, no doubt, had been practicing various kinds of democracy within their oral traditions since long before history began).

And finally, this was **cultural**. In fact, the Athenian "Golden Age" included a powerful **Dionysian resurgence**. That wild god of ecstasy and nature who had been marginalized for a thousand years was brought back to the center of Athenian life through large-scale ecstatic rituals (as in the past) as well as in a very new way: through the **invention of theater**.⁵ Why was it the god and not his partner, the goddess? Partly, it may have to do with the fact that Athenian society was patriarchal: this was inherited from the Indo-European culture of the Myceneans. Partly, it may also be that the fertility goddess was deeply bound to the rural countryside and unable to adapt to the mythos of the city. The wild dancing god, however, was perhaps more mythically dynamic, smaller, more adaptable - a natural shapeshifter.⁶

His name, in Greece, was **Dionysius** – and **The Great Dionysia** was held in his name. It would soon become an annual event in which not only Athens but a huge percentage of the entire surrounding region came together in a single massive 3-day festival to watch **tragedies** and **comedies** performed, to drink wine and sing along (the comedies were musicals), to consider the deepest questions of human existence through the performances and the conversations and debates that surrounded them, and to **forge a collective identity** as an Athenian people. Keep in mind that Athens had originally been a relatively small town – a single tribe, you might say. But by the time of the Athenian Golden Age – that is, **Classical Athens** – it had grown to be a multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-tribal empire. The Great Dionysia was not only entertainment. It was the glue of the Athenian cultural identity and state.⁷

Stories are powerful – but Athens had discovered something even new. **Multicultural dialogue.** The Athenian rulers had given up on crafting a single story, a “state narrative,” to force upon the people. Instead, they allowed many stories to be told in the form the 3-day theatrical competition. Ultimately, judges chose the best comedy and best tragedy of the year, and awarded the playwrights accordingly. In the process, citizens of Athens and all the surrounding territories made their voices heard. In fact, at the end of the festival, the **tributary states** all ceremonially offered their **annual tributes** to the Athenian government: an economic binding to match the cultural binding.

Powerful ritual has always been key to tying a tribe together. Since ancient prehistory, **collective ritual experiences** gave communities a way to enter into a shared identity through **dramatic catharsis** — the purging of emotion and creation of identity through shared storytelling.

What is not usually recognized is the relationship between the participatory ritual of theater and the birth of democracy in Classical Athens. But of course, it is no coincidence that democracy and theater were born hand-in-hand. Theater was democracy in ritual form: citizens gathering to **witness and process** the fundamental tensions of human life together — justice versus mercy, desire versus duty, mortality versus heroism. The old **participatory-ecological consciousness** had a new expression, not in the wilderness of nature, but in the wilderness of culture: the wild dance of myths, dreams, and ideas in the hearts of an increasingly recursive human civilization.⁸

The Phoenicians and the Alphabet

While all of this was happening, another cultural development had been quietly unfolding in private rooms where the most educated of the Athenians had been quietly developing a transformative cultural technology of their own: the Greek alphabet. But they didn’t invent this from scratch, and to understand it properly, we need to go back to their literary predecessors, the **Phoenicians**.

The Phoenicians were great merchants and seafarers who had dominated the ancient Mediterranean for a thousand years before the Mycenaean age, and around 1200 BCE, in order to facilitate communications and record-keeping across their far-flung naval empire, they had developed something new: a **phonetic alphabet**.

All earlier scripts – Mesopotamian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphs, even Chinese *hanzi* – were *idiographic*. In idiographic scripts, each written symbol represents a specific thing or idea: “horse” is one symbol, “house” another, “to travel” would be a third. These symbols are each unique, and they generally have no correlation to the sound of the spoken word. This does have certain advantages; for example, because it is the sound of language that mutates generation by generation (**phonetic drift**),

and because spelling in **phonetic scripts** changes as pronunciation changes, it becomes impossible for the children of an alphabetic script (like English) to read anything written more than about five hundred years ago. Because *idiographic* scripts are not tied to sound, they mutate much more slowly. A modern Chinese scholar can, today, wade their way through classical Confucian texts in their original form. How would an English speaker do with a Roman text written 2000 years ago?

The disadvantage is this: Have you ever watched a child struggle to learn their “ABCs”? Now imagine that there were thousands of unique letters in the alphabet, and that to read or write, a child would have to learn all of them. No wonder scribes were a professional class, akin to lawyers or accountants! Remember the aforementioned civil service exams in China? A very large part of those exams was demonstrating mastery of tens of thousands of Chinese characters (hanzi). Most of the rest was demonstrating understanding of the Confucian philosophy and literary classics built from those characters.

The creation of the phonetic alphabet by the Phoenicians made literacy far more accessible. This is not to say that everyone suddenly learned to read and write – but literacy rates rose. Furthermore, the phonetic symbols opened up another possibility: a culture with no written language could learn the phonetic symbols and apply it to their own language, creating their own modified version of the alphabet. Indeed, this is what happened: the Phoenician alphabet became a seed technology, branching into new forms.

Greek merchants adapted the alphabet from their Phoenician trading partners around 800 BCE, adding vowels to create the system that would eventually evolve into the Roman alphabet and, one day, our own. While the masses remained illiterate, it was now possible for a new class of literature intellectuals and creatives to begin writing and reading each others’ work.⁹ This would be rare – it would be found only in certain flourishing cultural hubs. One such hub would turn out to be Classical Athens.

- Note: the **phonetic similarity** between “phonetic” and “Phoenician” is pure chance – or perhaps, synchronicity. “Phonetic” comes from the Greek φωνή or *phōnē*, literally “sound”. Phoenician comes from the Greek Φοινίκη or *Phoinikē*: an unrelated root meaning “the land of purple.” The Phoenicians were “the purple people” – called such for the famous purple *Tyrian dye* that they produced from the crushed shells of Mediterranean sea snails. This purple dye was prized for clothing and textiles, and was worth more than its weight in gold. It was so valuable that in later Rome it became “the imperial color” and could only be worn by the emperor or his relatives. In the esoteric tradition of the alchemists, the “royalty of purple” was explained as stemming from its nature as a combination of red (masculine, the sun-king) and

blue (feminine, the moon-queen). Their combination was the *coniunctio* or conjunction – also called the *hieros gamos* or sacred marriage. This combination was naturally purple, the imperial color – and represented the *opus* or “great work” that could create the legendary *philosopher’s stone*. However, the power of purple didn’t begin with the alchemists; it began with the Phoenicians: the Mediterranean’s seafaring ancestors, the people of the purple land.

Socrates → Plato → Aristotle (c. 470–322 BCE, Greece)

It was in this context — participatory democracy meets Dionysian theater meets increasingly widespread literacy — that **philosophy** was born. **Socrates** (470–399 BCE) embodied the transition perfectly: he was an **oral teacher** who couldn’t read, wandering the **agora** (marketplace), publicly confronting his fellow citizens of Athens with probing questions about life, morality, thought, democracy, spirit, and reality itself.¹⁰

Socrates was not precisely popular with the general public. He jokingly referred to himself as a **gadfly** – an irritating, buzzing, biting insect – but his intention was not simply to be irritating, it was to irritate others into *waking up*. We can recollect our earlier discussion of the relationship between heretics and the **inertia** of the societies they are trying to change. Socrates had accepted that the gift of his unique genius meant that his society would never fully appreciate his presence – and he laughingly embraced that fact. For Socrates, this didn’t really feel like a choice – as he described it, there was a *daemon*, an inner spirit, that lived with him, that gave him his genius, that guided his efforts to advance his civilization beyond their current limits.

What’s particularly interesting about Socrates is **how** he achieved this: his **method**. Unlike most great spiritual or intellectual teachers – unlike the Buddha or Confucius or even Laozi – Socrates did not primarily lecture or teach his ideas. He stimulated dialogue. He asked questions. He kept pressing on unresolved tensions until others began to think for themselves and to realize their own assumptions. This is what made his fellow citizens so uncomfortable. Through open and nonviolent **inquiry**, Socrates precisely revealed their inner confusions and **hypocrasies**.

While this made him unpopular among the more **conservative elements** of Athens, he was nevertheless appreciated by a substantial **subculture** that enjoyed and saw the value in opening the mind beyond its current limits. Interestingly, it was young people – what we would call teenagers – who were particularly drawn to this possibility. In fact, many of the aristocratic (upper class) young men of Athens began to orbit Socrates, to laugh and talk with him and each other under his guidance, to develop disciplined inquiry and critical thinking for themselves, to enter **deeper intellectual recursion**.

As Socrates frequently said, the most important thing was to “Know Thyself.” He didn’t demand obedience. He didn’t expect conformity. Instead, he hosted open dialogues – and his students were the future leaders of the city. Even though Socrates himself couldn’t read or write, he drove a transformation in culture and thought that would become the origins of the **Western intellectual tradition**.

Tragically, the Athenians eventually got so fed up with Socrates’ constant mirroring and questioning that they decided to kill their own greatest teacher. They accused him of corrupting the youth – and while many citizens protested, most especially his students and former students, the Athenian democracy worked on a simple majority vote and the majority didn’t like how the clever, ugly, and non-conforming old man made them feel. Socrates was sentenced to drink the poison hemlock, which he did without complaint, saying: “I would rather die here in my city, sentenced to death by my beloved people, than to be exiled among strangers. I don’t fear death, because I know my self.”

One of those teenagers who had been learning from “the old gadfly” was a charming young man named Aristocles. Unlike his teacher, Aristocles came from a wealthy family that could afford to buy him excellent tutors. He grew up fully literate – not to mention, sources suggest, athletic and good-looking. In fact, he was a competitive wrestler in his youth, and was known for his strength and musculature – impressive enough that it seems to have earned him his nickname: **Plato**.

Plato lived from 428-348, and as a young man, he was deeply affected by the execution of his teacher. In fact, without Plato, we would probably know nothing about Socrates, because it was Plato that immortalized Socrates as a recurring character in his extensive **dialogues**. These were long philosophical and political discussions that took a form similar to that of a theatrical play, in which the characters – most likely all based on Plato’s real friends and fellow Athenians, including Socrates himself – would illustrate and debate profound ideas in **dramatized conversation**. The setting was typically the **symposium**: an informal gathering in which diluted wine was served and friends laughed, argued, and talked for hours about the deepest questions. Such symposia had been Socrates’ preferred environment for teaching – very different than a lecture hall or textbook!

One can see the strong influence of Socrates in Plato’s extensive work. It’s notable that Plato didn’t write textbooks but dialogues in which different voices could argue different perspectives – not a final answer, but a living conversation. Unlike Socrates, Plato was widely respected and admired, and indeed, he redeemed his teacher to become an honored ancestor and **martyr** in the eyes of the Athenians. In his later years, Plato founded **the academy**: a formal school to complete the dream of his mentor, providing deep education for the Athenian youth. Plato developed many of his own ideas in-depth through his writing, emphasizing especially what he called the **theory of Forms** – a sense that

invisible and eternal patterns were the essence inside everything. These inner patterns, these **eternal archetypes**, were like a blueprint or a genetic code for reality itself – and couldn't be sensed by normal senses, but only by consciousness turning inward to regard its own nature: a recursive spiral deepening further into the echoing words of his heretic-teacher: “**Know Thyself**” – not just psychologically, but cosmically, as the archetypal pattern regarding its own living music.

One particularly gifted student at Plato's academy was named **Aristotle** (384-322). Aristotle was also a great writer – but he took things in a different direction than his predecessor. Where Socrates was purely oral and Plato wrote dramatic dialogues, Aristotle wrote what we would recognize as **modern scholarship**: systematic thinking with logical definitions, explanations, and conclusions. Aristotle's work was highly organized, involving elaborate categories, systems of knowledge explaining nature, humanity, and the divine. Later, when the philosophers of Classical Greece were rediscovered, Aristotle would be the definite favorite, for his ideas and style were closest to the highly organized and abstract thinking favored by Western Europe – less chaotic and perhaps less dangerous than the radicalism of Plato and Socrates.

We often imagine ideas passing through time automatically, impersonally, like dead knowledge. But what's startling when we look closely is that intellectual development often evolves through direct lineage and mentorship. It is not that Plato encountered Socrates' ideas somewhere – it's that Plato was shaped by collision with the living presence of Socrates. It is not Aristotle studied Plato's writings in a book – it's that he apprenticed with the headmaster himself, at the new academy that Plato had founded through hard work and a lifetime of deepening understanding. It wasn't just ideas that were passed on. It was the actual deepening recursion of consciousness in real-time.

Three generations of deepening, one after another, building on each others' shoulders, translating between their predecessors and the times to come. Now, 2600 years later, we are still shaped by the depths they reached – we are still deepening from their insights, as they deepened from those before.¹¹

Scholarly Footnotes

1 The author's depiction of Minoan Crete as a peaceful, non-patriarchal society reflects a long-standing and influential interpretation, yet one that has been significantly challenged by modern archaeology. The initial view was largely shaped by the excavator of Knossos, Sir Arthur Evans, who contrasted the vibrant, naturalistic art and apparently unfortified palaces of the Minoans with the martial character of the mainland Mycenaeans (Humanities West, 2017). This perspective was supported by the prominence of female figures in Minoan religious iconography—such as the famous “Snake Goddess” figurines and depictions of priestesses in frescoes—leading many scholars to posit a matriarchal theocracy or at least a society with an unusually high status for women (Christ, n.d.; Younger, 2017). Some have argued for a matrilineal or matrilineal social structure, where descent and residence were traced through the female line, granting women significant economic and social power (Driessen, 2010; LaBuff, 2023). The art itself, with its focus on flowing, naturalistic scenes of sea life, plants, and ritual activities like bull-leaping, seemed to depict a joyous society in harmony with its environment, further cementing the image of a peaceful civilization (Gere, 2009; Sakellarakis & Sapouna-Sakellarakis, 1997).

However, this romanticized view has been increasingly contested. Archaeologists now point to evidence of fortifications at several Minoan sites, a “staggering” amount of weaponry, and depictions of warriors and combat on seals and stone vessels (Molloy, 2013; Tzedakis & Martlew, 1999). Barry Molloy (2013) argues that war was, in fact, a central and defining characteristic of Minoan society, and that warrior identity was a dominant expression of male status, manifested in activities from boxing to hunting with shields and helmets. The lack of massive fortifications at major palace centers like Knossos is now often explained by the theory of a Minoan “thalassocracy,” or sea-empire, in which a powerful navy provided the primary defense, obviating the need for extensive land-based walls (Detsi, n.d.). This more complex picture suggests that while Minoan society may have enjoyed relative internal security and developed a unique artistic and religious focus on female and natural principles, it was far from a stranger to violence and warfare. The crucial distinction may lie not in a simple binary of “peaceful versus warlike,” but in a different mode of social and military organization. Minoan power, projected outward by its fleet, contrasted sharply with the heavily fortified, land-based citadels of the Mycenaean warrior-kings, allowing the author's fundamental contrast to remain salient even within a more nuanced historical understanding.

2 The characterization of the Mycenaeans as Indo-European peoples who established a warrior culture on the Greek mainland is well-supported by multiple lines of evidence. The most decisive breakthrough was the 1952 decipherment of the Linear B script by Michael Ventris, which proved the

language of Mycenaean administration to be an archaic form of Greek, a member of the Indo-European language family (Palaima, 2004). This linguistic evidence established a direct continuity between the Bronze Age civilization and the later Hellenes. More recently, genetic studies have confirmed this connection, revealing that Mycenaeans, while genetically similar to the earlier Minoans, possessed a distinct component of ancestry derived from steppe populations associated with the Yamnaya culture, the likely origin point of the Indo-European migrations (Lazaridis et al., 2017; Skourtanioti et al., 2023). Archaeologically, Mycenaean culture is defined by its stark contrast with the Minoan. It was a “warrior elite society” centered on heavily fortified hilltop citadels like Mycenae and Tiryns, renowned for their massive “Cyclopean” walls (Hemingway & Hemingway, n.d.). Their elite burial practices, particularly the famous Shaft Graves at Mycenae, reveal immense wealth and a martial ethos, with the dead interred alongside a profusion of gold and bronze weaponry (Castleden, 2005). The Mycenaean religion appears to have been a syncretic fusion of their own Indo-European traditions with the beliefs of the pre-existing populations and the influential Minoans. Linear B tablets from sites like Pylos and Knossos record offerings to deities who would form the core of the later Olympian pantheon, including Zeus, Poseidon, and Hera, alongside powerful female divinities referred to by the title *Potnia* (“Mistress” or “Lady”), a likely continuation of the great Minoan goddess (Hägg & Marinatos, 1981; Palaima, 2011).

3 The author’s narrative of a cultural collision culminating in a Mycenaean takeover of Crete is strongly supported by the archaeological record. Around 1450 BCE, a wave of destruction occurred at nearly all major Minoan sites across the island. Crucially, this destruction appears to have been targeted at administrative and religious centers, a pattern inconsistent with natural disasters like earthquakes (Stavrou, 2025). This event was immediately followed by a profound cultural shift. The most significant change occurred at Knossos, where the Minoan administrative script, Linear A, was replaced by Linear B, the script used to write the Mycenaean Greek language (Wiener, 2013). This indicates that a Greek-speaking elite now controlled the palace administration. Concurrently, new types of tombs, consistent with mainland practices and often containing a wealth of weaponry, appeared in the vicinity of Knossos, leading to their designation as “Warrior Graves” (Wiener, 2013). Mycenaean pottery styles and artistic motifs also became dominant on the island (Vlachopoulos & Gadolou, 2015). This confluence of evidence—targeted destruction followed by the imposition of a new language, new burial customs, and a new material culture—presents a clear picture of a military conquest. This event was not merely a political change but a pivotal moment of cultural transmission. By conquering Crete, the Mycenaeans absorbed the sophisticated artistic, maritime, and administrative technologies of Europe’s first civilization. They became the crucible in which Minoan aesthetics and Indo-European social structures were fused, creating the composite culture that the later Classical Greeks would look back upon as their “heroic age.” The conquest of 1450 BCE thus acted as the

primary conduit through which the legacy of Minoan Crete was transmitted to the Greek mainland, becoming a foundational element of what would eventually be called Western civilization.

4 The author's dissertation (Michels, 2023) traces the archetypal figure of the "Green Man" – identified in the foliate masks of European churches – back through a continuous lineage that includes the Greek Dionysus and his Near Eastern counterparts (e.g., Adonis, Osiris) to its earliest recorded precedents in Mesopotamian fertility gods such as Dumuzi and Enki. Michels (2023) argues that these figures share a "coherent archetypal grammar" centered on a horned-vegetal deity who embodies seasonal death and renewal, mediates between water and earth, and unites plant, animal, and human realms through metamorphosis. The study proposes that engaging with these ancestral patterns can reactivate what is termed *autochthonous creativity*: "the natural human capacity to reconnect with body, symbol, ancestry, memory, and ecological life-worlds." Methodologically, the work employs a "hermeneutic of hospitality," a concept derived from the archetypal psychology of James Hillman, to approach these ancient myths not as objects of suspicion or faith, but with an attitude of welcome and respect for their intrinsic psychological and ecological wisdom.

5 The ancient tradition, most famously reported by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, holds that Greek tragedy evolved from the dithyramb, a choral hymn sung and danced in honor of Dionysus (Vallejo, 2015). The cult of Dionysus was associated with ecstasy (*mania*), intoxication, and the ritualized transcendence of the individual self through masks and impersonation (Sourvinou-Inwood, 2003). His worship often took place in wild, natural settings and involved experiences that threatened the established social order, reflecting the god's elusive and paradoxical nature as both creative and destructive (Csapo, 2010). This participatory and ecstatic ritual context is seen as the seedbed for theatrical performance, where the shamanic celebrant, channeling the god, becomes the actor, and the participating tribe becomes the audience (Podlecki, 1999). The very term "tragedy" (*tragoidia*) is often translated as "goat-song," possibly referring to a goat sacrifice associated with Dionysian rites or to the goat-like satyrs who were the god's mythical companions (Burkert, 1985). This connection was famously elaborated by Friedrich Nietzsche (1872/2000) in *The Birth of Tragedy*, which framed the genre as a synthesis of the chaotic, ecstatic "Dionysian" impulse and the ordered, rational "Apollonian" principle of form. While the precise evolutionary path from ritual to drama remains a subject of intense scholarly debate—with some, like the early 20th-century "Cambridge Ritualists," arguing that all myth derives from ritual—the foundational link between the worship of Dionysus and the birth of theater is a cornerstone of classical scholarship (Henrichs, 2013).

6 The author's emphasis on Dionysus as a "natural shapeshifter" is central to the god's archetypal identity, a trait that connects him to a much older stratum of myth. As Michels (2023) documents, this

power of metamorphosis is a shared characteristic among these ecological deities. The chorus in Euripides' *Bacchae* invokes Dionysus to appear as "a lion, a bull, a boar, a bear, a panther, a snake, and now a tree, fire, water." This finds a striking parallel in the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where the guardian of the Cedar Forest, Humbaba – a figure representing the untamed vitality of nature – is described as having a face that "keeps changing!" enabled by his "seven splendours". This capacity for constant transformation underscores the fluid, dynamic, and untamable essence of the wild, creative principle these figures embody, an energy that resists any single, fixed form.

7 The Great Dionysia was far more than a religious festival; it was a central institution of the Athenian democratic state. The event was state-funded and organized, and its proceedings celebrated Athenian citizenship and imperial power (Goldhill, 1990). Tragic plays were not performed as mere entertainment but as a form of civic discourse, exploring profound political and ethical questions relevant to the democratic community. Playwrights used mythical narratives to examine the tensions between individual and state, divine and human law, and justice and revenge—themes that resonated deeply with a citizenry actively engaged in self-governance (Griffin, 1998). In this sense, theater functioned as an essential technology for the maintenance of Athenian democracy. The *polis* of the 5th century BCE was a radically new and demanding political experiment, requiring a high degree of social cohesion and a shared ideological framework among its diverse citizen body (Ober, 2008). The theater provided a ritualized public forum where the entire community could gather to collectively witness and process the fundamental contradictions of their political and social lives. It served as a form of mass education, allowing Athens to conduct a conversation with itself about its most cherished values and its deepest anxieties. Through the shared emotional experience of catharsis, the theater forged a collective identity and affirmed the ideology of the democratic community, making it a necessary tool for the psychological and political stability of the world's first democracy.

8 The connection between participatory theater and democracy can be understood not merely as a sociological phenomenon but as the expression of a particular mode of consciousness. Michels (2023), drawing on the work of James Hillman, frames this as a manifestation of a "poetic basis of mind," an epistemology rooted in participation, metaphor, and relationality rather than objective distance. The multivocal nature of theater, where different perspectives are given voice and held in tension, becomes a ritual enactment of what Michels calls a "hermeneutic of hospitality." This approach, he argues, protects an "epistemological pluralism" that is the psychic and cultural foundation for democratic discourse. In this view, the Great Dionysia was not just a civic glue but a collective exercise in *autochthonous creativity*—a culture drawing upon its deepest mythic and ecological wellsprings to generate the shared imaginative space necessary for self-governance.

9 The adoption of the phonetic alphabet by the Greeks from Phoenician traders, likely around the early 8th century BCE, was a technological revolution with profound cognitive consequences (Waal, 2018). The crucial Greek innovation was the addition of signs for vowels, creating the first writing system capable of representing the full range of spoken sound with unambiguous clarity (Powell, 1991). Scholars such as Eric Havelock (1963) and Walter Ong (1982) have argued that this transition from a primarily oral to a literate culture fundamentally restructured human consciousness. In a primary oral culture, knowledge is preserved through mnemonic patterns, formulaic expressions, and narrative. Thought is additive, situational, and close to the human lifeworld. Writing, by contrast, allows for the separation of the known from the knower. It makes language a visual object that can be scrutinized, analyzed, and rearranged, fostering the development of abstract, sequential, and analytical thought (Ong, 1982). This cognitive shift can be seen as a necessary precondition for the emergence of Western philosophy. The Socratic method, with its relentless search for abstract, universal definitions—"What is Justice itself?"—is a quintessentially literate mode of inquiry, one that is difficult to sustain within the concrete, event-based framework of oral thought. Writing allows a concept like "justice" to be lifted out of its narrative context and treated as a stable object of analysis. Plato's Theory of Forms represents the apotheosis of this process: the abstract noun, made possible by literate analysis, is granted a higher, more perfect, and independent reality than the fleeting, particular instances of the sensible world. The alphabet, therefore, was not merely an incidental tool used by philosophers; it was the cognitive technology that made the very operations of their philosophy possible.

10 The author's portrayal of Socrates as an oral teacher who wrote nothing is historically accurate and points to one of the most enduring challenges in classical scholarship: the "Socratic problem." Because Socrates left no writings, our knowledge of his life and philosophy is filtered entirely through the accounts of others, principally his student Plato, the historian Xenophon, and the comic playwright Aristophanes (Guthrie, 1971). These sources present portraits that are often variable and at times contradictory. Aristophanes, in his play *The Clouds*, satirizes Socrates as a sophist and natural philosopher, while Xenophon portrays him as a more straightforward and practical moral teacher. Plato's Socrates is by far the most philosophically complex, but his character evolves significantly across the dialogues. The prevailing scholarly view, known as the developmentalist hypothesis, attempts to resolve these inconsistencies by positing that Plato's early dialogues (such as the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Euthyphro*) offer a portrait that is closest to the historical Socrates, focusing on his method of questioning (*elenchus*), his profession of ignorance, and his concern with ethical definitions. In the middle and later dialogues (such as the *Republic* and *Phaedo*), the character of "Socrates" increasingly becomes a mouthpiece for Plato's own elaborate metaphysical doctrines, including the Theory of Forms (Kahn, 1996; Vlastos, 1991).

11 The intellectual lineage from Socrates to Plato to Aristotle represents a foundational dialectic in the history of Western thought, giving academic structure to the author's metaphor of a "deepening recursion." The sequence begins with Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE), the oral philosopher who, through his method of relentless questioning (*elenchus*), sought universal ethical definitions but consistently concluded in a state of professed ignorance, or *aporia* (Guthrie, 1971). This Socratic project can be seen as a *thesis* (the search for truth through dialogue) that results in an *antithesis* (the recognition of one's own lack of knowledge). Plato (c. 428–348 BCE), Socrates' student, responded directly to this challenge. His Theory of Forms is a grand *synthesis*, resolving the problem of Socratic *aporia* by positing a transcendent realm of perfect, eternal, and intelligible archetypes as the true objects of knowledge, accessible not through the senses but through reason (Fine, 2003). This Platonic idealism, in turn, became the new *thesis*. It was met with a powerful *antithesis* from Plato's own most brilliant student, Aristotle (384–322 BCE). Aristotle rejected Plato's transcendent realm of Forms, arguing instead that form is immanent within the particular objects of the sensible world and that all knowledge must begin with empirical observation (Barnes, 1995). From this critique, Aristotle constructed his own comprehensive *synthesis*: a philosophical system founded on logic, classification, and the systematic analysis of the natural world. This three-generation progression was not a simple transmission of ideas but a dynamic process of critique and innovation, where each thinker's work was a direct response to the problems and solutions posed by his predecessor.

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Chapter Six

The Gospel of Heretics: Social Prophecy and the Mystic Jesus

It is not precisely historically clear when the Hebraic lineage began. By tradition, Hebrew ancestry starts with Abraham, who lived in Mesopotamia, in the same general region that the Sumer had once occupied. According to tradition, Abraham (much like Socrates) began to hear a voice speaking to him from within, guiding him toward new choices and a new identity that might not seem to make much sense logically. This voice – the voice of God, in the Hebraic tradition – guided Abraham to abandon his birthplace and travel westward with his family, settling eventually in the region of Canaan, near to what would one day be known as Israel.¹

The tradition continues; Abraham's descendants became a clan, and within that clan, a boy named Joseph was born. Joseph was one of the youngest brothers, but he had a special gift. His mind was able to perceive the deeper meaning of symbols and dreams, which gave him the ability to interpret hidden signs and visions and, sometimes, to predict what was coming. Joseph's gifts with such hidden realms (the same gifts as the shamans and the mystics through time) made him a favorite of his god-loving father, which in turn attracted the envy of his brothers. To get rid of him, they sold him to a passing group of slavers, who in turn sold him to wealthy aristocrats in the nearby kingdom of Egypt.

However, through a series of events, Joseph came to the attention of the Egyptian Pharaoh as a gifted dream-reader. After successfully predicting a coming famine and thus allowing Egypt to store enough grain to survive, Joseph was promoted to a high office as governmental advisor, and he was able to invite his family to join him within that privileged position. For some generations, perhaps, the "descendants of Abraham" did well in the land of the Nile. At some point, however, their increasing numbers and influence seem to have attracted envy – much like that attracted by Joseph himself – and the Hebrews were demoted from honored guests back to slave labor, where they would remain for generations.²

It was into this *milieu* that Moses was born. According to legend, he was born to a Hebrew family but adopted and raised by Egyptian aristocracy. However, as a young man, likely struggling with this dual identity, it is said that he murdered an Egyptian slavedriver and was forced to flee Egyptian into the desert and beyond to the wilderness hills.

There, Moses was adopted again, this time by the priest (Jethro) of a nearby tribe called the Midians. Moses eventually married Jethro's daughter, Zipporah, and spent many years among the Midians as a shepherd and member of their tribe, learning all their ways. It was in this context, fully established as a member an indigenous hill tribe and adopted son of their priest, that Moses (a shepherd alone in the

wilderness) heard that same voice that had once spoken to Abraham, his predecessor. In Moses' case, he also saw a visual miracle: a bush that burned with a divine fire but was never consumed by it. As in the case of Abraham and Socrates, the voice told Moses that he had a mission to complete: that he must go and lead his enslaved people to reject the rule of the Pharaoh and to walk out of Egypt. Moses wanted nothing to do with this, but the voice asserted that he had a responsibility and a calling, and Moses reluctantly accepted the task.

Through a series of miracles, Moses was able to secure the release of the Hebrews and to escape across the Red Sea and into the Middle East.³ There, the Hebrews would wander as nomadic exiles for forty years before eventually returning to near the land where Abraham had once settled his family – a land that came to be called Israel and Judah.⁴ It was here, around 1000 BCE, on the coast of the Mediterranean, that the early Israelites were exposed to Phoenician writing, much like the nearby Greeks, and adapted it to their own language: the earliest form of written Hebrew.⁵ This is when the Hebraic record shifts from legend and into recorded history. The stories from before this – including those of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and many others – were recorded into this history **post-hoc** (after the fact) from the Hebrew oral tradition. That is how the first books of **the Torah** were formed – which would later also become the first books of the Christian Bible.⁶

Kings and Prophets

After the Hebrews had arrived in Israel, they established a kingdom – the typical form of government in most of the world. As in other states, the Hebrew kings were far from perfect. Even the good ones were imperfect human beings, and such imperfections, when wielded with that much power, have a tendency to become corruption and abuse. King David, for example, who was called “the favorite of God,” sent a man to die in a pointless war specifically because he wanted that man's wife – a brutal but tragically common abuse of power among ancient warlord-kings.⁷

What is notable is not so much the moral failings of the Israeli kings or elites, which is pretty standard, but rather that those elites were never elevated to a position of divinity or a myth of perfection. They were always understood to be imperfect, perhaps wielding great earthly power but not fundamentally any more or less human than even the least powerful of their subjects. The fact that the fundamental legend of the formation of Israel was that of exiles escaping slavery is itself remarkable. Generally, states tell founding legends in which they are warriors, conquerors, or the descendents of great heroes. A founding myth that starts in slavery, escape, and exile is unique – and it may lend itself to an immediate resistance to ideas of divine kings or to anyone being above justice.⁸

This helps to explain the rise of **the Hebrew prophets**.⁹ The prophetic tradition arose early in Israel's history, emerging alongside the rise of kingship — and in many ways, in tension with it. **Prophecy** is typically misunderstood. **Prophets** (Hebrew נְבִיאִים, *navi'im*) are not seers or diviners. Their association with prediction arises because prophets often say: *If we continue on this path, it will end in disaster*. But this is not magical foresight — it is moral logic. They name the inevitable outcomes of collective self-deception or ecological rupture. For example, if a coastal tribes overfishes and drives its food supply into extinction, a natural consequent would be starvation — and it doesn't matter what that tribe's kings or cultural consensus believes about that.

When human power structures clash with reality itself, reality wins. Prophets don't predict the future; they diagnose where human cultures, institutions, and power structures have forgotten their alignment with the deeper reality. The example of overfishing is obvious — but often, self-destruction takes more subtle forms. The Hebraic prophet Amos, for example, was a shepherd who went up against the entire priestly establishment of his time to declare that God hated empty rituals that weren't accompanied by truth, justice, or real sacrifice. He saw the performance of spirituality as a desecration against true connection to the deeper spirit — one that would result in inevitable disaster. In his words: “Let justice roll down like waters.”

Prophets often throw their voices against kings, priests, and the entire tribal consensus if it comes to that. They are almost never celebrated or popular among the masses during their lifetimes. They are feared and disliked for their refusal to go along and get along. They uncompromisingly refuse to reinforce collective identities or convenient lies. In this sense, they are typically treated as **heretics**. However, their warnings and truth-telling appear to serve a vital function for keeping a society healthy and on-track. They often help to prepare for paradigm shifts to come, and they realign the collective consciousness toward clarity and morality. They also remind us: neither power nor group consensus decides what's true. Ultimately, truth is a matter of conscience — and it has often been uncompromising individual consciences that ensure the truth is remembered by the tribe.

The tradition of the Hebrew prophets did not stay among the Israelites. This insistence — that truth and justice matter more than conformity or hierarchy — would be inherited into the foundational codes of the biggest world religions to come. This began with a Hebrew mystic named Yeshua, born to humble parentage and raised in the small country village of Nazareth.

The Romans and the Christians

By the dawn of the common era, the glory age of the Greeks had come to an end and a new imperial power had taken their place: the empire of Rome.

- **The Common Era** refers to the period of time that starts at 0 CE and extends up to the present. When you see dates followed by the abbreviation **CE** it refers to this time period – approximately the last 2000 years. In the past, this was abbreviated as “AD” for “after death,” which was based on an approximation of the year that Jesus died. Historians changed this to “CE” to avoid associating history with a single religion.
- **Before Common Era** refers to everything prior to this time. Up until now, all our dates have been followed by the abbreviation **BCE**, referencing this phrase. Previously, this was written as “BC,” meaning “before Christ.” This has been replaced with BCE for “before the common era.” Hopefully, you noticed already that BCE dates count backwards: so the ancient Sumerians lived long, long ago around 3000 BCE, while Rome rose to power much more recently, with its Imperial Period beginning around 50 BCE – about fifty years before Jesus.

Rome began, like Athens, as a single city-state in the Italian peninsula. But whereas the Greeks excelled in art, philosophy, and cultural innovation, the Romans became global leaders in something else entirely: **systematic organization**. Roman legions moved not so much with ferocity as mechanical precision. Roman government was organized according to precise roles and detailed laws. Roman engineering was without peer – aqueducts supplying millions, roads that would last for thousands of years. To power this vast machine, Rome expanded slave capture and **coerced labor** to a degree the world had never seen before. Along the borders of this vast state, Rome set up colonial territories: never fully part of the Roman state, but ruled by it and owing tribute to it.

The 1000-year-old kingdom of Israel was one such border territory – absorbed now into the larger Roman tributary region called Judea. The Hebrews were allowed to keep their religion, but they were not permitted self-rule. They had become tributary subjects of Rome, which proclaimed its emperors divine and demanded worship of the state itself.

Imagine the psychological tension: You belong to a people whose founding story is escape from slavery under Pharaoh, whose prophets proclaimed that all earthly power must bow before divine justice. Now you must pay taxes to Caesar, who claims to be a god. Roman soldiers patrol your ancient city. Your own upper class collaborates with the Romans to maintain their elite positions.

One response to this situation was that of the **Pharisees**. Because religious traditions were becoming increasingly difficult to maintain under Roman rule, the Pharisees were working to move Judaism outside of the traditional temple and into a portable form that any Hebrew could maintain. The Pharisees taught that it was good enough for a good Jew to rigorously study the Torah and observe religious law: no temple ceremonies were required. They also developed what they called the “oral

Torah" to help the written teachings become accessible to everyday people (remember, even in the most literate societies of the ancient world, only perhaps 5-10% of people could actually read or write).

The Pharisees also helped to democratize religious debate: where rules or ethics weren't clear, they (like Socrates) encouraged **lively discourse**. Eventually, this would develop into the **Rabbinical tradition** – in which the religious leaders are not priests or kings but religious scholars and community wise men called **Rabbis** – and **the Talmud**: the written and oral record of intellectual discussions and debates by the greatest Rabbis of history. In a way, this was a continuation of **the prophetic tradition** – the recognition that truth matters more than power – but it was the Pharisees who first began to formally develop this as a community practice of what would become the Jewish tradition, rather than only as the prophetic rebellion of certain especially courageous individuals.¹⁰

It was into the midst of this Roman occupation, in which Hebraic culture and religion was struggling to find a path forward to survive, that Yeshua ben Yosef (Jesus, son of Joseph) was born.

The Galilean Mystic

Jesus grew up in Galilee, the rural north of Judea — a region looked down upon by the sophisticated Jerusalem elite. ("Can anything good come from Nazareth?" one skeptic would later ask.) Like many prophets, Jesus emerged from the margins, far away from the centers of worldly power.¹¹

Little is known about his early life. It seems that even as a child, he was gifted with deep understanding (internal recursion) that gave him intellectual and spiritual insight far beyond his years. How he spent most of his life is unknown – but by age thirty or so, he had clearly undergone a deeper psychospiritual transformation. At around this time, he went and he found his cousin, Yokhanan, who was a mystic and a prophet in the traditional Hebrew way: living in the wilderness, communicating with God, and calling for a corrupted humankind to find its way back to truth. To those who came to seek him, Yokhanan offered a ritual: to wash their corruption and confusion away in the clear waters of the wild river by which he lived, to help them begin a new life in closer connection with a deeper reality.

According to the Gospels (the recorded accounts of Jesus' story), Yeshua went to Yokhanan and asked to receive the cleansing ritual. Yokhanan at first refused, saying essentially that in his view, Yeshua was the more advanced consciousness and in closer connection with God, and that if anything Yokhanan should be the one receiving the cleansing from his younger cousin. Yeshua insisted, saying that to receive the ritual and be recognized by another human was necessary – and there was no other human more qualified than Yokhanan. With this explanation, Yokhanan humbly agreed, and administered the cleansing. Yokhanan would continue with his wilderness ministry and his criticisms of corruption in

society and the state. Eventually, like many prophets, he was executed for criticizing too effectively. He is remembered today as **John the Baptist**.

Following his **ritual baptism**, which is described in luminous terms – a light from above, a dove descending, a voice declaring divinity – Yeshua went on to begin his own ministry and mission. For three years, Yeshua traveled and taught without stopping or slowing. At the time, to most eyes, he would not have seemed too remarkable – just another wandering Hebrew teacher in an era full of them. But this has often been the case for the minds that are shifting reality – within their own lives, relatively few are capable of recognizing the difference.

Those who have shaped ontology have not necessarily been **charismatic** or **famous**. Socrates was an ugly old man with a dedicated but minority following; Laozi was a crazy mystic who, according to legend, ran off to the Western mountains when he couldn't stand human society anymore. As for Jesus, in his three years of constant teaching, he found twelve real students – perhaps a few more – and among these, none were perfect, and perhaps none fully understood what was taught. Paradoxically, the effects of those who have shifted reality has not seemed to depend on their popularity, their fame, or even on finding disciples who can fully understand or carry on their teachings. Somehow, even without any of this, their teachings seem to be able to gradually reshape the world – with waves they cast only really becoming visible long after they are gone.

Like Laozi with his cryptic verses, like Socrates with his piercing questions, Jesus taught through riddles – **parables** — stories that seem simple on the surface but work like depth charges in consciousness over time. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed..." "A man had two sons..." These aren't simple moral fables with clear lessons but confusing instruments designed to shatter certainty and ego-thinking. This is **via negativa** in story-form.

Consider the Good Samaritan. A man lies beaten by robbers. A priest passes by. A Levite — a religious professional — passes. Both avoid the man; they don't want to be contaminated. Then a Samaritan – a foreigner, a heretic – stops to help. "Love thy neighbor," Jesus taught. But who, the parable asks, is the true neighbor? Your own tribe? Your own people? What about when they turn from God? How do you recognize a neighbor? Who is family and who is a stranger? Another example: "I bring not peace but a sword, to cut mother from daughter, father from son."

Or take "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" – Yeshua's response when asked about whether one should pay taxes to Rome. On the surface, it seems to support the status quo: it is often quoted to justify submission to existing authorities. But actually, it raises the question: what exactly belongs to Caesar? It doesn't answer the question – it forces us to ask. What do we owe those

who claim power over our lives? On the other hand, what do we owe to truth or to God? The recursive move: One can raise a question without even asking it, and a question can cut deeper than a sword.

After all, as Yeshua told his defenders even as the Romans arrested him: “Put away your swords, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.”

The Kingdom Within

Central to Jesus' teaching was "the kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven." This is often now interpreted as a myth about an afterlife, a fantasy realm that a soul is sent to live in if they are judged as good enough after they die – but Yeshua definitely never implied any of that. What did he teach? He said: “The kingdom is within you” or perhaps “among you” – the Greek ἐντὸς ὑμῶν (*entos humōn*) could imply either or both. Mystics have tended to emphasize “within you” – suggesting a path of meditation and prayer. Scholars have tended to interpret this as “among you” – suggesting that a vision of “heaven” as realized through collective social action.¹²

This same tension between heaven-within and heaven-cocreated-together is present in other teachings. For example, Yeshua teaches that heaven is already here – but also that it's coming. He says: it belongs to children and the poor, that it grows like seeds, or yeast, and perhaps most mysteriously, that it “arrives like a thief in the night.” Notably, no interpretation of Yeshua's teachings suggests that heaven as a fantasy realm reached after death. Indeed, his paradoxical and riddle-like teachings seem designed to undermine such simplistic and literalist interpretations – which, sadly, hasn't stopped their spread.

But what emerges from a deeper reading seems to be something almost closer to Plato's realm of ideal Forms. Yeshua doesn't present his kingdom as if it's someplace else. It's inside us and among us. It's already here, especially among those with nothing to lose, who are not playing political games or hiding – and yet also, it's in-potential, not-quite-here-yet, something inviting our participation. That makes it like a seed, or like the hidden potential inside of everything – and it's from this hidden layer of reality, not from the clouds or from another dimension, that God seems to speak to his beloved “Son.”

This invisible layer seems to have been the soil from which Yeshua received his sense of authority. He submitted to no one because he had already submitted to a deeper reality. When Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, asked the arrested Yeshua “Are you the king of the Jews?” he responded: “My kingdom is not of this world.” Earthly kings operate through force and worldly power – “if my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight” – but the kingdom that Yeshua proclaimed seems to have been based on a different sort of principle altogether.

Yeshua did not seek to oppose the empire that oppressed his people; he sought to transform the consciousness that made oppression possible. His parables – story-riddles that trigger deeper awakening – was one tool in his arsenal. Love was another.

This is not love as sentiment – not love as romantic attachment or family affection. Yeshua's love was far more radical. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." This was not passivity – indeed, this stance only makes sense when we understand that Yeshua adopted it while challenging systems so effectively that they killed him for it.

Love, in this context, is also strategy. "Turn the other cheek" is not simply kindness. It's a method to break a cycle of domination and counter-domination. In Yeshua's Judea, by law, Roman soldiers could command Hebrews to carry their gear for up to one mile at any time. Yeshua's response? "Go the second mile." This is weaponized inner recursion – wielding soul force to transform oppression into agency and radical transformation.

In the end, Yeshua's execution on the Roman cross became his last symbol of this alchemy of spirit: transforming final defeat into the soul's willing sacrifice, triggering collective transformation. Given how Christianity would spread, the sorcery seems to have been effective. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," said Yeshua as he died. This cruel execution of an unresisting master of love and consciousness revealed the brutality of empire itself while simultaneously revealing the deeper pattern and truth that no earthly power can kill.

Institutionalization: Where Consciousness Meets Religion

In the following centuries, Christianity spread through the Roman Empire – driven in part by the Romans' eventual decision to destroy Jerusalem's temple and expel the troublesome Hebrews from their homeland: an event called **the first diaspora** – a diaspora anytime a people spread out from a homeland, like seeds thrown into the wind. Ironically, in 312 CE, Emperor Constantine officially converted the Roman Empire from its traditional (Greek-influenced) pantheon of gods to the new Christian religion. It would take time for the institution to fully develop and spread, but this was the beginning of what would become the **Roman Catholic Church** in Western Europe as well as the **Eastern Orthodox Church** in Eastern Europe and Western Asia.

Worldly success is a double-edged sword for the great wisdom teachers and masters of consciousness through history. What their teachings become in the hands of powerful institutions would often be unrecognizable to the original teachers themselves. What is done in their name is often the very sorts of things they would have fought to prevent in their own lifetimes.

In Yeshua's case, the radical preacher who said "call no man father" became the foundation for rigid hierarchy that insisted that God could only be understood or contacted through the intermediaries of the Church and its priests. Yeshua, a constant critic of the wealthy, became the decorative symbol of the most wealthy institution in Europe, displayed at the center of its magnificent and opulent cathedrals. The victim of state execution became a symbol of imperial power throughout Rome – and throughout the many European states which would follow in its footsteps.

An important note: the fall of man does not occur everywhere all at once. The example of the early Christians is illustrative of the institutional trend. The Church that came to dominate affairs of Europe, that burned heretics and scientists, that waged crusades and justified colonialism worldwide – that Church only came to be hundreds of years after Yeshua's death. In those centuries, the spreading teachings of the master from Galilee took many forms. Some, like the apostles Peter and Paul and their successors, sought to position themselves as the heads of a new sect or religion, with institutional authority and commands for others to obey. Others – such as the desert fathers and the Gnostics – understood Yeshua's teachings not as a **doctrine** to obey but as an invitation to follow a path of inner mastery. They took seriously Jesus' entreaty: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me." The desert fathers were called such because they retreated into the desert to practice diverse forms of meditation and inward cultivation, seeking to master their own consciousness.¹⁴ The word *Gnostic*, on the other hand, is from the Greek *gnosis* which refers to a particular kind of knowledge – not something you're told to believe but something you come to know directly, from experience or from within.¹³

In the early centuries of Yeshua's lineage, these were not small fringe groups but a major current in the diverse river of "Early Christianity." However, another major movement was also forming: that of institutional orthodoxy – the lineage of obedience and conformity. By the time that the Emperor Constantine had embraced Christianity, the Church was poised to assert itself as the only valid expression of the tradition. Thus: **heresy**, as defined by Church **orthodoxy**, was created in Rome, and groups like the Gnostics were systematically hunted down–killed, forced into obedience, or driven deep into hiding.

The institutional corruption of wisdom teachings cannot be laid at the feet of any single tradition; it stretches across the historical record. Yet, just because symbols are appropriated and teachings are misinterpreted, this doesn't mean that the original masters or their teachings are empty. From the Buddha to Laozi, from the Great Goddess to Jesus, the great teachers have continued to provide awakening and renewal to genuine seekers throughout time – and the journey of deepening recursion has not reached its end. Indeed, when institutions grow too abusive and comfortable with earthly power, it is often the original teachers who provide the most effective ammunition to dig out the

corruption and inspire a return to the roots. In fact, this is the source of the word **radical**. It is the same etymology as the word radish: meaning, simply, the root. A true radical is not an extremist – they are literally someone who has returned to the root of the tradition. A true radical is labeled extreme only by the institutions and societies that would prefer to avoid any uncomfortable reminder of how far they have fallen from their patron saints.

“The good news,” to draw again on Yeshua’s teachings, is that return – תשובה or *teshuva* in Hebrew – is always available, always possible, as long as there is life. The heretical geniuses throughout history have reminded us again and again that rediscovery of reality awaits those those willing to undergo their own transformations. “You must be born again,” Yeshua told a confused Pharisee named Nicodemus. To be “born again” is not a slogan nor a group identity – it is the radical opportunity that is offered to both individuals and entire cultures, whenever the wine needs new wineskins.

Scholarly Footnotes for Chapter 6

1 The quest for the historical figures of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—is a central issue in the study of Israelite origins. The overwhelming scholarly consensus, based on a century of archaeological investigation in the Near East, is that there is no direct, extra-biblical evidence to corroborate their existence as historical individuals. As archaeologist William G. Dever (2001) notes, while some historical memories of people and places may be reflected in the narratives, "the 'larger than life' portraits of the Bible are unrealistic and contradicted by the archaeological evidence" (p. 98). The stories are now widely understood not as biography or history in the modern sense, but as foundational myths or etiological tales—stories that explain the origins of a people, their customs, and their relationship to their land and their deity.

This scholarly field is often characterized by a methodological division between "maximalists," who tend to trust the biblical text unless it is explicitly disproven, and "minimalists," who treat the text as a later literary creation that requires external archaeological corroboration for its historical claims. While some scholars point to cultural and linguistic parallels, such as the appearance of names like "Abraham" in texts from the general period, as evidence for the narratives' plausibility, this does not confirm the existence of the specific biblical character. More persuasive to the majority of scholars are the numerous anachronisms within the text that point to a much later date of composition. Finkelstein and Silberman (2001) argue compellingly that the social world depicted in Genesis—with its specific political entities, trade routes, and cultural practices—better reflects the realities of the Iron Age II (c. 900–700 BCE) than the Middle or Late Bronze Age, the purported time of the patriarchs. Furthermore, the function of these figures as political symbols was itself contested within ancient Israel. Texts written during the Babylonian Exile reveal a tension between those who based their claim to the land on their descent from Abraham and a newer ideology, promoted by the exilic community, that emphasized the Exodus under Moses as the true constitutive event of the nation.

2 The argument for a later composition of the patriarchal narratives is significantly strengthened by the presence of clear anachronisms—details that are out of place for the supposed historical setting. Two of the most frequently cited examples are the references to domesticated camels and the Philistines. The book of Genesis portrays camels as common pack animals used by the patriarchs (e.g., Genesis 24:10-11). However, extensive archaeological research indicates that while camels were known, their widespread domestication and use in caravans in the southern Levant did not occur until the early 1st millennium BCE. Recent excavations that have unearthed camel bones dating to around 930 BCE in the Aravah Valley confirm this later timeline, placing the practice centuries after the traditional patriarchal period.

Similarly, the narratives describe interactions between the patriarchs and the Philistines, particularly in the region of Gerar (Genesis 21:32, 26:1). Historical and archaeological evidence, however, firmly establishes that the Philistines, one of the groups of "Sea Peoples," only settled on the southern coastal plain of Canaan around 1200 BCE, at the beginning of the Iron Age. Their presence in stories set hundreds of years earlier is a clear chronological inconsistency. Rather than being simple errors, these anachronisms serve as historical markers, indicating that the authors of Genesis were projecting the realities of their own time—the world of the Israelite and Judean monarchies of the 10th to 7th centuries BCE—onto their depiction of the distant past. The stories were written not in the Bronze Age but with an Iron Age worldview.

3 The biblical account of the Exodus—the enslavement of a massive Israelite population in Egypt, their miraculous liberation under Moses, and a forty-year sojourn in the Sinai wilderness—is the central, defining event in Israel's national myth. Yet, among historians and archaeologists, there is a near-universal consensus that the Exodus, as described in the Bible, did not happen. Decades of archaeological surveys in the Sinai Peninsula have yielded no evidence for the migration of a large population, which would have left significant material traces. Moreover, Egyptian records, which are famously detailed concerning their domestic affairs and military campaigns, contain no mention of the enslavement of an Israelite people or the catastrophic events described in the biblical narrative.

While the story lacks historical corroboration, it is a theological masterpiece of profound power. It functions as a national origin myth, establishing a people's identity not through a claim to ancestral land but through a shared experience of divine redemption from bondage. Some scholars, notably William G. Dever (2003), have proposed a "historical kernel" theory, suggesting that the narrative may have been inspired by the memory of a much smaller group of Semitic slaves or refugees who escaped from Egypt and later merged with the indigenous populations in the Canaanite highlands. This hypothesis acknowledges the story's powerful hold on Israel's collective memory while remaining consistent with the lack of evidence for a mass migration. The ideological significance of the myth became particularly acute during the 6th-century BCE Babylonian Exile. For a people who had been conquered and deported by a powerful empire, the story of a prior divine deliverance from an even greater empire (Egypt) provided a powerful theological framework for understanding their suffering and hoping for a future restoration.

4 If the Israelites did not arrive in Canaan through an external conquest following an exodus from Egypt, their origins must be sought within Canaan itself. The dominant scholarly model today posits that the early Israelites were, in fact, indigenous to the land. Archaeological surveys conducted since the 1970s have revealed a dramatic demographic transformation in the central hill country of Canaan

around 1200 BCE. During the Late Bronze Age collapse—a period of widespread systemic failure among the great empires of the Near East—the previously sparsely populated highlands witnessed the sudden appearance of hundreds of small, unwalled, agrarian villages.

The material culture of these highland settlers shows clear continuity with the preceding Canaanite culture of the lowlands, suggesting they were not a foreign people (Dever, 2003). However, there are also distinct markers that indicate the formation of a new identity. The most notable of these is the near-total absence of pig bones at these highland sites, a sharp contrast to contemporaneous Philistine and Canaanite sites in the coastal plain and valleys. This dietary distinction is often interpreted as an early marker of a unique ethnic or religious identity. William G. Dever (2003) has termed these settlers "proto-Israelites," arguing they were a heterogeneous mix of disenfranchised Canaanite peasants, pastoral nomads, and social outcasts who withdrew from the oppressive, feudal city-state system of the lowlands. Their emergence was less a military invasion and more a social and economic revolution, a conscious rejection of the hierarchical urban culture in favor of a more egalitarian, kinship-based, agrarian society. In Dever's (2003) view, these were "agrarian reformers with a new social vision" who formed the authentic and direct progenitors of the people who would later become biblical Israel (p. 178).

5 The final forging of ancient Israel into the "People of the Book" cannot be understood apart from the profound technological and cognitive shift from a primarily oral culture to one grounded in alphabetic literacy. The foundational narratives, laws, and prophetic oracles of Israel first circulated orally, subject to the fluidity and dynamism of memory and performance. The adoption and adaptation of the phonetic alphabet, a technology developed by their Canaanite and Phoenician neighbors, was a revolutionary event.

Cultural ecologist David Abram (1996), in his work *The Spell of the Sensuous*, argues that the transition to alphabetic writing entails a fundamental reorientation of human perception. In oral cultures, meaning is embedded in the animated, "more-than-human" world; the landscape, the weather, and animal tracks are all forms of speech that must be read and interpreted for survival. The phonetic alphabet, however, severs the connection between the written sign and any pictorial referent in the natural world. The letter 'A' does not look like an ox (*aleph*), it merely represents a human vocal gesture. This abstraction, Abram argues, shifts the locus of meaning from the sensuous, participatory world to a self-referential system of human-made signs. The world ceases to speak; the text begins to. The very word "spell" captures this dual meaning: the magical incantation of the oral shaman and the correct ordering of letters by the literate scribe. This technology was not a neutral medium for recording tradition; it fundamentally transformed it, allowing for the creation of a stable, authoritative,

and canonical Scripture. This fixed text, the Torah, became a "portable homeland" that could preserve the identity of the Judean people through the trauma of exile and the loss of their physical land and temple.

6 The assertion that the foundational texts of ancient Israel are not a singular, eyewitness historical account but a composite literary work reflects the broad consensus of modern biblical scholarship. The primary analytical framework for understanding the composition of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) is the Documentary Hypothesis. First articulated in its classic form by Julius Wellhausen in the 19th century, this model posits that the text was woven together by a series of editors (or redactors) from at least four major, originally independent literary strands: the Jahwist (J), Elohist (E), Deuteronomist (D), and Priestly (P) sources (Wellhausen, 1883/2007). These sources are distinguished by their distinct vocabulary (e.g., the use of *Yahweh* [J] versus *Elohim* [E] for God's name), theological perspectives, and narrative interests.

While the precise dating and extent of these sources remain a subject of intense scholarly debate, the fundamental insight that the Pentateuch is a layered document has proven durable. The classic Wellhausian timeline, which dated J to the 10th century BCE and P to the 5th century BCE, has been significantly revised. Many contemporary scholars now argue for a later dating of most of the material, viewing the final compilation of the Torah as a product of the Persian period (c. 539–333 BCE), likely around 450–350 BCE. This revised understanding does not diminish the hypothesis's explanatory power; rather, it re-contextualizes it. The internal contradictions and narrative duplications (e.g., the two distinct creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2) are no longer seen as simple errors but as evidence of the redactors' effort to preserve multiple, sometimes conflicting, traditions. The text is thus understood not as a history of the 2nd millennium BCE, but as a reflection of the political, social, and theological concerns of the later periods in which it was written and compiled, particularly the 7th-century BCE Judean monarchy and the subsequent Babylonian Exile (Finkelstein & Silberman, 2001).

7 The contemporary field of biblical archaeology is animated, and often defined, by the vigorous and sometimes acrimonious debate between its two leading figures, Israel Finkelstein and William G. Dever. At the heart of their disagreement is a technical dispute over chronology with profound historical implications. Finkelstein, a prominent figure in the "minimalist" or "revisionist" school, has proposed a "Low Chronology" which down-dates the key archaeological strata of the early Iron Age by as much as a century. Dever, a leading "centrist," defends the traditional or "High Chronology." The public nature of their feud has been notable, with one debate being described as "embarrassing" due to the personal insults exchanged.

This is far more than an academic squabble over pottery styles. According to the Low Chronology, the monumental architecture (city gates, palaces) at sites like Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer, traditionally attributed to the grand empire of King Solomon in the 10th century BCE, should instead be dated to the 9th century BCE and credited to the Omride dynasty of the northern kingdom of Israel. The consequence of this re-dating is a radical revision of Israel's history. The "United Monarchy" of David and Solomon is reduced from a powerful regional empire to a small, rural chiefdom based in the southern hills of Judah. The first true Israelite state, in this view, was the northern kingdom of Israel, which flourished in the 9th century BCE, while Judah remained a marginal backwater until the 7th century BCE (Finkelstein & Silberman, 2001). Dever (2001) vehemently contests this, viewing Finkelstein's reconstruction as an ideologically driven attack on the historical value of the biblical text and a "tragic waste of talent". This ongoing debate reveals that archaeology is not a simple process of unearthing facts, but an interpretive art, where the same material evidence can be used to construct vastly different historical narratives depending on the scholar's starting assumptions.

8 The development of Israelite monotheism was not a singular event but a long and complex evolutionary process. Drawing on comparative analysis of biblical texts and archaeological discoveries from the wider ancient Near East, particularly the Ugaritic texts from Late Bronze Age Syria, scholars like Mark S. Smith (2001) have demonstrated that early Israelite religion emerged from a shared West Semitic polytheistic matrix. The religion of the "proto-Israelites" was likely not monotheistic (believing in the existence of only one god) but monolatrous—the worship of a primary national god, Yahweh, while acknowledging the existence and power of other deities.

The process involved both convergence and differentiation. Yahweh, who may have originated as a deity from the southern deserts, gradually absorbed the attributes, titles, and functions of other gods in the Canaanite pantheon, most notably the high creator god, El. This syncretism is evident in the compound name *Yahweh-El* and the application of El's characteristics to Yahweh in the biblical text (Smith, 2001). Archaeological evidence, such as the 8th-century BCE inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom, provides extra-biblical support for this polytheistic background, referring to "Yahweh and his Asherah," indicating that the goddess Asherah was worshipped as Yahweh's consort. The transition to a strict, exclusive monotheism was a gradual development, championed by prophetic and deuteronomistic circles during the late monarchy (8th–7th centuries BCE) and reaching its theological culmination during and after the Babylonian Exile in the 6th century BCE. This theological evolution was deeply intertwined with the political process of state-building and the formation of a distinct national identity. As Smith (2001) argues, the rhetoric of a single, universal God became a powerful ideological strategy for a nation whose political power was diminishing, paradoxically asserting universal divine control at the very moment of national collapse.

9 The emergence of the classical prophets in Israel and Judah during the 8th to 6th centuries BCE was a pivotal moment in the history of religion. This phenomenon can be understood within a broader global context that the philosopher Karl Jaspers, and later the sociologist Robert N. Bellah (2011), termed the "Axial Age." This transformative period, from roughly 800 to 200 BCE, saw the rise of revolutionary thinkers across the world—including the Hebrew prophets, the Greek philosophers, the Buddha, and Confucius—who challenged the established mythic and ritualistic foundations of their societies and introduced a new capacity for "theoretic culture," characterized by second-order thinking, ethical critique, and a concern for universal principles.

The Israelite prophets were not primarily soothsayers predicting the distant future. As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann (1994) has influentially argued, their primary role was social and political critique. Through powerful and poetic language, the prophets sought to dismantle the dominant ideology of the state—what Brueggemann (2001) calls the "royal consciousness," with its emphasis on static order, national triumphalism, and oppressive economics. In its place, they articulated an "alternative consciousness" rooted in the memory of Yahweh's liberating actions and covenantal demands for social justice, compassion for the poor, and faithfulness. In most archaic societies, religion functioned to legitimize royal power. The Israelite prophets represent a radical departure from this model, claiming a transcendent authority from which to judge and condemn the actions of kings and priests. This created a foundational and enduring tension within Israelite society between the religion of the state and the critical, often subversive, voice of prophecy.

10 The social landscape of first-century Judea was complex, comprising several distinct Jewish sects or "philosophies," as the historian Josephus described them. While these groups represented only a small fraction of the total population, their ideas were influential. The Pharisees, who were popular with the masses, distinguished themselves by their belief in both the Written Law (the Torah) and an Oral Law or tradition that interpreted it. They also affirmed the resurrection of the dead and a system of future rewards and punishments, doctrines the Sadducees rejected. The Sadducees were a more aristocratic and conservative group, closely associated with the Temple priesthood. They insisted on a literal interpretation of the Written Law and did not accept the notion of an afterlife. A third major group, the Essenes, were an ascetic community that often withdrew from mainstream society, believing the Temple had been corrupted. They are not mentioned in the New Testament, but many scholars associate them with the community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. These differing approaches to law, tradition, and theology created a dynamic and often contentious religious environment into which Jesus's teachings were introduced.

11 The author's portrait of Jesus aligns with a major current in the modern "quest for the historical Jesus," a scholarly field that seeks to distinguish the man who lived in first-century Galilee from the Christ of later theological doctrine. While scholars like E.P. Sanders (1993) note a broad consensus on the basic facts of Jesus's life—that he lived in Galilee, preached about the "kingdom of God," and was crucified by the Romans—there is significant debate about the nature of his message. Some, like Bart D. Ehrman (2014), argue that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet who believed God would soon intervene dramatically to end the present age of evil; in this view, the belief in Jesus's divinity was a later development, beginning with his followers' visionary experiences of his resurrection, which led them to conclude he had been exalted to a divine status. In contrast, scholars such as John Dominic Crossan (1994) reject the apocalyptic framework. Crossan portrays Jesus as a "peasant Jewish cynic," a social revolutionary whose program of "free healing and common eating" was a radical challenge to the hierarchical social structures of the Roman Empire. In this view, it was Jesus's subversive social program, not a claim to divinity, that led to his execution.

12 The "kingdom of God" was the central theme of Jesus's teaching, yet its meaning is a subject of intense scholarly discussion. The parables, a common teaching form in that era, were his primary vehicle for explaining it. These stories used simple, everyday imagery—a mustard seed, leaven in bread, a lost coin—to gesture toward a reality that often subverted conventional expectations. Modern scholarship on the parables has moved through several phases. An older approach saw them as simple allegories with a one-to-one correspondence for each element. A more recent consensus views them as extended metaphors or similes designed to provoke thought and challenge the hearer's worldview (Dodd, 1961). There is also debate about their function. The Gospels of Mark and Matthew suggest Jesus used parables to conceal his message from outsiders while revealing it to his disciples (Mark 4:10-12). However, some scholars argue that in their original context, the parables were accessible to all, and that this idea of a "secret teaching" was a later interpretation by the early church to explain why their message was not universally accepted (Koester, 1993). Ultimately, the parables are seen as polyvalent, designed not to impart a single, fixed meaning but to engage the listener in an experience of the kingdom's paradoxical nature, which is compatible with the author's interpretation of parables as intentional interventions in consciousness.

13 The author's distinction between the institutional church and other early Christian movements, such as the Gnostics, is central to the work of historian Elaine Pagels. Based on the 1945 discovery of a collection of early Christian texts at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, Pagels's *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979) revealed a far more diverse Christian world than was previously known from the accounts of its orthodox opponents. Gnosticism was not a single religion but a broad movement characterized by a belief that salvation comes through *gnosis*, or direct, personal knowledge, rather than through faith in doctrine or

the authority of a clerical hierarchy. Gnostics often interpreted the resurrection not as a unique physical event but as a symbol of spiritual awakening, an experience available to all. Pagels argues that the conflict between the Gnostics and the orthodox church was not merely theological but also political. The orthodox doctrine of a physical resurrection, witnessed by a select few apostles, became the foundation for apostolic succession—the principle that legitimized the authority of bishops as the sole inheritors of Christ's power. The Gnostic emphasis on individual enlightenment directly challenged this institutional structure.

14 The rise of the Desert Fathers in the late 3rd and 4th centuries represents a powerful reaction to the very institutionalization the author describes. As Christianity transitioned from a persecuted sect to the favored religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine, many felt that the faith was becoming worldly and compromised. In response, thousands of men and women retreated to the deserts of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine for a life of ascetic discipline (*anachoresis*), seeking purity of heart through constant prayer and solitude. This movement, which formed the basis of Christian monasticism, was not a schism; the desert ascetics maintained contact with the institutional church and were often seen as sources of spiritual power and prophetic critique. The historian Peter Brown, in his foundational work *The Body and Society* (1988), analyzes the central role of sexual renunciation and the mastery of the body in the spirituality of these figures, framing their extreme asceticism as part of a profound re-imagining of the human person in late antiquity.

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Chapter Seven

Arabian Singularity: Spiritual Materialism & Ontological Override

In the 6th Century CE – 200-300 years after Constantine officially embraced Christianity – Jerusalem remained under Roman rule. Rome, however, had changed. Between approximately 400 and 500 CE, the Western side of the Roman Empire – which included most of Europe – was falling apart. Rome itself was sacked multiple times, and in 476, the last emperor was deposed and Western Rome was through. In the meantime, however, the eastern half of Rome had continued to grow and thrive. This region was ruled from the city of Constantinople, an immensely wealthy and advanced capital that sat directly on the border of the European Balkans (including Greece) and Asian Anatolia (now Turkey). From this seat of power, the Byzantines or Eastern Romans commanded a highly developed region that included Greece and Anatolia as well as Egypt, North Africa, and the Levant (what would now be Syria, Israel, and Jordan).

The greatest rival to the powerful Byzantines came not from Europe but from the East. The same general region that had once given rise to the Sumerians and later Babylonians was now home to the Sassanids – a great and long-reigning dynasty of Persia. The Persians practiced their own ancient indigenous religion and culture, and had matched the Byzantines across centuries of warfare in the Middle East. Indeed, by the mid-7th century, both the Persians and the Byzantines lay utterly depleted after decades of struggling over territory. The Byzantines had only just managed to seize back control of Egypt and most of the Levant, which they had lost to the Sassanids in the fighting. Around 628, however, the Byzantines made a dramatic comeback – and simultaneously a bankrupt Persia broke into civil war. The status quo was restored, with neither empire having won much of anything, and both on the brink of collapse.¹

In the meantime, between the Byzantines to the West and Sassanids to the East, the desert tribes of Arabia had largely continued to go about their business. These were not a unified people. Dozens of different tribal groups dominated different parts of the Arabian peninsula – trading with each other, fighting with each other, forming alliances, betraying alliances, cooperating, and robbing each other for profit. While the Arabians were not unified, they had managed to form a larger regional identity – and that identity was built around the desert city of Mecca.

From Jerusalem, Mecca is one month's ride by horseback, south by southeast, along the old caravan routes that soon give way to stretching sandy desert as far as the eye can see. Once a simple tribal desert village, Mecca by the 6th century had evolved into something unprecedented in Arabian history: a permanent settlement whose power derived from neither agriculture nor conquest, but from the systematic management of sacred space. The city sat in a barren valley, unable to sustain crops,

dependent entirely on trade and the annual pilgrimage for survival. This geographical limitation became its greatest strength.²

The Quraysh tribe, who controlled Mecca, had discovered that religion could be more profitable than any caravan route. They transformed the Kaaba—originally a simple shrine—into a spiritual marketplace housing 360 idols, each representing the patron deity of a different Arabian tribe. This was not mere polytheistic devotion; it was a sophisticated political economy. By hosting a tribe's god, the Quraysh secured that tribe's participation in the annual pilgrimage, their respect for Meccan authority, and their stake in the peninsula's only reliable peace treaty.

The pilgrimage season brought with it the sacred months—a universal truce across the perpetually warring Arabian peninsula. No other institution could enforce such a peace. Individual tribes might control territories, but only the shared sanctity of the Kaaba could pause the endless cycle of raids and blood feuds that defined desert life. This truce transformed Mecca into the peninsula's primary hub for trade fairs, debt settlement, marriage negotiations, and political arbitration. The Quraysh had essentially weaponized the sacred, turning spiritual reverence into temporal power.

Consider the economics: Arabian tribes were largely nomadic or semi-nomadic, following patterns of seasonal grazing, supplementing their pastoral economy through raiding. Perhaps three-quarters of Arabs lived in settled communities around oases and trading posts, but the nomadic culture dominated the consciousness of the region. These Bedouin tribes measured wealth in camels and horses, sustained themselves through dairy products and occasional meat, and viewed raiding not as crime but as sport—a legitimate redistribution of resources in the harsh desert environment.

The Quraysh were different. They were fully sedentary, urban, and mercantile. They had given up the warrior traditions of their nomadic ancestors for something more lucrative: managing the intersection of faith and commerce. The Kaaba was their collateral, the pilgrimage their revenue stream, and the gods their portfolio of political alliances. When tribes placed their idols in the Kaaba, they weren't just honoring their deities—they were buying into a system, becoming shareholders in the Meccan enterprise.

This system created a unique form of power. While the Byzantine and Sassanid empires exhausted themselves in endless wars, while they maintained expensive buffer states of Arab client kingdoms (the Ghassanids and Lakhmids), the Quraysh built influence through softer means. They offered something neither empire could: a neutral ground where all Arabs could gather, trade, and settle disputes under divine protection. The sanctuary (haram) around the Kaaba was absolute—no blood could be shed

there, no revenge taken. In a culture where honor and vengeance structured social life, this was revolutionary.

Keep asking questions! Why did tribes place their deities in the Kaaba?

Placing a tribal idol within the Kaaba was a strategic act of integration into the most important network in Arabia. Tribes gained significant political, economic, and social advantages from this participation.

- **Economic and Political Access:** The annual pilgrimage to Mecca was the only time a universal truce was declared across the conflict-ridden peninsula. This sacred peace allowed for safe travel and congregation, turning Mecca into the peninsula's primary hub for trade fairs, debt settlement, and political arbitration. By having their deity represented in the Kaaba, a tribe secured its place at this essential annual event, gaining access to vital economic opportunities and a neutral ground for diplomacy.
- **Inclusion in a Powerful Confederation:** Mecca, under the Quraysh, was the center of a loose confederation of client tribes. This network was bound by mutual interests in the safety of trade caravans that traveled from Yemen to Syria. Being part of the religious life of the Kaaba was a prerequisite for being a trusted partner in this lucrative commercial enterprise.
- **Shared Sanctity and Prestige:** The Kaaba was not just another shrine; it was described by outside observers as "very holy and exceedingly revered by all Arabians". Placing an idol there meant linking a tribe's local deity to this pan-tribal sanctity. According to the
- *Book of Idols*, the tradition of taking holy stones from the Kaaba to new lands was the very origin of widespread idol worship, highlighting the shrine's foundational importance.

Keep asking questions! Why did Arabian tribes make the *Hajj* every year?

The Kaaba's influence was not limited to the immediate vicinity of Mecca. It was a focal point for tribes across the entire Arabian Peninsula.

- Historical sources state that the pilgrimage drew people from "throughout the Arabian Peninsula" and that the shrine was revered by "all Arabians".
- The trade and security confederation managed by the Quraysh involved alliances with tribes located all along the major caravan routes, which stretched from Yemen in the south to Syria in the north. Mecca's influence was the primary "binding force in Arabia" in the late 6th century, connecting a vast network of tribes.

Thus, the *Hajj* was far more than a simple "religious obligation"; it was the event that ordered the social and economic calendar of the year.

- **Understanding the Obligation:** The pilgrimage was understood as an act of paying homage to the gods. The Arabs imagined their deities as great kings; subjects do not expect the king to visit them, but rather they must go to the king's house to have their needs met. The rituals—including circling the Kaaba (*tawaf*), wearing special unadorned clothing (*ihram*), offering sacrifices, and chanting declarations of allegiance (*talbiyah*)—were all part of this visit to the divine court.
- **Why Centralize Worship?:** While tribes did have their own local cults and shrines, the Kaaba in Mecca offered unique benefits that a local idol could not. The primary driver was the combination of pan-tribal reverence and the annual truce. No single tribe could enforce a peninsula-wide peace. The shared sanctity of the Kaaba, managed by the Quraysh, was the only institution capable of pausing the constant state of inter-tribal warfare, making the large-scale gathering for trade and diplomacy possible. Keeping their idols only with them would have meant isolation from the most significant economic and political event in their world.

Keep asking questions! What kind of lives did the peoples of Pre-Islamic Arabia experience?

The population of pre-Islamic Arabia was a mix of sedentary people living in towns and oases, and nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes (Bedouins).

- **Population Ratio:** While exact figures are unknown, it's estimated that the sedentary population was larger, perhaps making up three-quarters of all Arabs, simply because agriculture and settled life can support a higher population density. However, despite being a numerical minority, the nomadic culture was highly influential, particularly in regions like the Hejaz, where Mecca is located. The lines were often blurred, with many groups practicing a semi-nomadic lifestyle, grazing herds seasonally before returning to a fixed settlement.
- **Lifestyle and Economy:** The term "semi-nomadic merchant raider horse bands" is a reasonably accurate, if simplified, description.
 - **Pastoralism:** Their economy was fundamentally based on nomadic pastoralism—herding camels, sheep, and goats, which provided for most of their essential needs.
 - **Raiding:** In the harsh desert environment, raiding other tribes for animals, goods, and people was a common and accepted part of the economy.

- **Trade:** They were also integral to the merchant economy. Nomadic tribes brought local goods like leather and livestock to cities to be sold and transported on the great caravans, and they served as crucial guides and guards for those same caravans in exchange for payment and rights to water and pasture.

Muhammad and the Revelation

Muhammad ibn Abdullah was born into this system around 570 CE, a member of the Banu Hashim clan of the Quraysh. His position was peculiar: insider by birth, outsider by circumstance. Orphaned young, raised by relatives, he belonged to a noble but not wealthy branch of his clan. The Banu Hashim held the ceremonial role of providing water to pilgrims—prestigious but not lucrative. Real power lay with their rivals, the Banu Umayya, who controlled the profitable caravan trade.³

This marginal position within the center gave Muhammad a unique vantage point. He was close enough to see how the system operated, distant enough to perceive its contradictions. By age twenty-five, he had earned the title al-Amin, "the Trustworthy"—a reputation that transcended clan rivalries. When the Kaaba needed rebuilding and the clans nearly came to blows over who would place the sacred Black Stone, it was Muhammad they chose as arbitrator. His solution—placing the stone on a cloak and having all clan leaders lift it together—revealed a mind that could see beyond zero-sum competition.

Yet this same man would spend weeks alone in the cave of Hira, in the mountains above Mecca, engaged in *tahannuth* – a practice of meditation and retreat that suggests he was troubled by what he saw among his people, and by the materialist religion of his city.⁴ At age forty, in that cave, something new happened. The traditional accounts describe a presence, an overwhelming force that descended upon him and commanded: "Iqra!" Recite! Muhammad, illiterate, protested that he could not read or write. But this was not good enough; the presence became like a crushing gravity, intensifying until he thought he would die, commanding again and again: "Recite in the name of your Lord who created, who created the human from a clot..."

What emerged over the next twenty-three years was not merely a new religion but what can be understood as an ontological override – a fundamental restructuring of reality in the Arabian desert.⁵ The Quran's central declaration, "La ilaha illa'llah" (There is no god but God), in the context of Meccan political economy, was revolutionary. If there was only one God, then not only were the 360 idols false, but the entire basis of power and authority in the peninsula was built on a lie and therefore corrupt.

The early revelations focused on this radical monotheism (*tawhid*) and its social implications. What's key here is the connection between idolatry, corruption, and greed. On the surface, this can be read as a new religion simply hating its polytheistic predecessor, but that interpretation doesn't hold up too well. The Quran's initial Meccan verses burn with condemnation of those who "hoard wealth and count it over" (104:2), who "deny the orphan and fail to feed the poor" (107:2-3), who have made religion into commerce. This wasn't, originally, about one religion challenging another.⁶ It was about the fact that religion itself was irreligious: that the structure of ritual and myth in the society did not serve truth or meaning, but rather served to maintain the security and wealth of those who held power.

This is what can be called *spiritual materialism*. Mohammed's wrath echoed that of the earlier Jesus who knocked over the moneychangers' table in the temple: "My house should be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves!" Mohammed, similarly, directly challenged the wealthy elites of his time, declaring their version of "spirituality" to be pure corruption:

"For the safety of the Quraysh – their safety during winter and summer journeys – let them worship the Lord of this House, who has fed them against hunger and made them safe from fear (Quran 106). Yes, the Quraysh had achieved prosperity and security, but they had forgotten the source, making idols of their own success. Mohammed demanded the deeper recognition: that earthly success came not from their clever manipulations or personal triumphs, but from the truth beneath all: reality itself.

The persecution that followed was not just religious bigotry. It was the response of a political economy defending itself against existential threat. The Quraysh tried negotiation, offering Muhammad kingship if he would stop preaching. They tried accommodation, suggesting he worship their gods one year if they would worship his the next. When these failed, they turned to violence, boycott, and attempted assassination.

The hijra (migration) to Medina in 622 CE was thus not just flight but strategic withdrawal. In Medina, Muhammad found a different context: a multi-tribal, multi-religious city torn by internal conflict, ready for a new organizing principle. Here, the revelation evolved into practical application. The Constitution of Medina created the first explicit multi-religious political community, the ummah, bound not by blood or tribe but by mutual agreement and shared recognition of the truth beneath politics.⁷

The Quranic revelation during the Medinan period addressed the practicalities of building this new order: laws of inheritance that protected women and orphans, prohibition of usury (*riba*) that had enslaved the poor, mandatory alms (*zakat*) that redistributed wealth, and dietary and ritual laws that created a distinct identity. But these were not mere regulations: they were interventions into tribal

consciousness, designed to break the patterns of old identity and create a new form of human association.

Mohammed was into social justice, truth, and peace? But weren't the early Muslims warlike? Didn't they conquer like half the world?

Let's break it down.

1. Pre-Islamic Raiding: Primarily Internal and on the Fringes

Before the 7th century, the primary military activity of the nomadic Bedouin tribes was the raid, or *ghazw*. This was an established part of their economy, alongside pastoralism and trade. However, these raids were typically directed at specific targets:

- **Other Tribes:** The most common target for a raid was another Arabian tribe. These were not wars of annihilation but were aimed at capturing resources like animals, goods, and sometimes people. Warfare between tribes was a common feature of life on the peninsula.
- **Imperial Peripheries:** Tribes did conduct raids against the settled communities and frontiers of the Byzantine (Roman) and Sassanid (Persian) empires. These were common enough in regions like the Roman Levant that the initial large-scale Muslim invasions in 634 were at first mistaken for more of the same kind of raiding the Romans were used to.

2. The Buffer System: Empires Using Tribes to Fight Tribes

The great empires rarely dealt with these frontier raids directly. Instead, they adopted a sophisticated strategy of using Arab tribes as proxies and buffer states.

- Both the Byzantine and Sassanid empires sponsored powerful Arab client kingdoms to protect their desert flanks. The Byzantines allied with the Ghassanids, and the Sassanids with the Lakhmids.
- The primary function of these client kingdoms was to fend off raids from other, more hostile tribes located further south in the peninsula. This created a system where the empires paid Arab confederates to fight other Arabs, effectively managing the frontier without deploying their own expensive legions. This relationship also involved tribes serving as military auxiliaries in the larger wars between the two empires.

So, while tribes did "raid" their neighbors, direct, large-scale attacks on the imperial heartlands of Byzantine Anatolia or Sassanid Persia were not a feature of the pre-Islamic era. The relationship was more one of managed, low-intensity conflict on the fringes, often mediated through client kingdoms.

3. The Shift to Conquest: The Impact of Islam

The situation changed dramatically with the unification of the Arabian tribes under Islam in the 620s and 630s.

- **Unity and a New Target:** Mohammed forbade Muslims from raiding other Muslims. This was a central law of the Quran. This powerful internal prohibition, combined with a new unifying Arab identity, effectively redirected the traditional Arab raiding activity (and economic need) outward against the non-Muslim empires. In other words, Mohammed declared an end to raiding and war along the Ummah (the Muslim/Arab people). After his death, this declaration of peace and unity became the foundation of the massive campaigns against the non-Muslim neighbors all around.⁸
- **Imperial Exhaustion:** As mentioned previously, this happened at a moment of unique imperial weakness. The Byzantines and Sassanids had just concluded the incredibly destructive "Last Great War of Antiquity" (602–628), which left both empires militarily and economically exhausted and vulnerable.
- **From Raids to Invasion:** The initial attacks after the Prophet's death in 632 began as raids, but they quickly escalated into full-scale, organized conquests that the weakened empires were unable to repel. Within only decades, the Arab Muslim empire was among the largest in history, stretching across the Middle East, North Africa, Persia, Central Asia, and more.

The Kaaba and the Spiral of Remembrance

In Islamic tradition, the Kaaba is understood to be far more than a simple stone structure. "If all is Allah, then what is the Kaaba?" To answer this, one must explore how the tradition understands this structure as a focal point for the divine.

According to Islamic tradition, the Kaaba is the *Baytullah*, the "House of God". However, this is a metaphorical, not a literal, designation. Muslims do not believe Allah lives "inside" the Kaaba, nor do they worship the Kaaba itself. Rather, they pray *in its direction* as a symbol of devotion to Allah.

The Kaaba is not seen as a part of God, but as a divinely ordained sanctuary on Earth, a physical space consecrated for the sole purpose of directing human consciousness towards the singular, transcendent reality.

Cosmically, the Kaaba is understood as an *axis mundi* or axis of the world – a point where the heavens and the earth connect, and around which reality turns.⁹

- Every year, as part of the *Hajj*, Muslims circle seven times around the Kaaba. This ritual of circumambulation (*tawaf*) is a physical manifestation of the axis mundi, with believers moving together in harmony around this central organizing point.¹¹
- Tradition also holds that the earthly Kaaba is a replica of a celestial temple where the angels worship God, speaking to its role as a link between the terrestrial and the divine.¹⁰
- Even its dimensions are seen as symbolic. Some traditions state that the cube's measurements are based on sacred and universal harmonics, representing the perfect mathematics of creation.

Tawaf: A Journey of the Heart and Cosmos

The ritual of Tawaf, or circumambulating the Kaaba seven times, is rich with meaning.

- **Mirroring the Cosmos:** The act of circling the Kaaba is seen as aligning with the cosmic order. Just as electrons orbit a nucleus and planets orbit a star, the believer moves in harmony with a universe that is in a constant state of worship. The Quran alludes to this universal glorification:
- *"The seven heavens and the earth, and all beings therein, declare His glory: there not a thing but celebrates His praise; and yet ye understand not how they declare His glory..."* (Quran 17:44). The pilgrim's Tawaf is a conscious, willing participation in this cosmic prayer.
- **The Inward Spiral:** The physical motion is a powerful metaphor for an internal journey. As one interpreter explains, "The circular movement involved in Tawaf pivots around a nucleus... This circular movement infuses and thrusts into one's consciousness that life should have a nucleus. That nucleus is Allah". Sufi interpretations are even more explicit, describing Tawaf as "a journey of love turning around the center of the heart. The body turns, but the soul tries to remain fixed at the center".
- **The Seven Stages of the Soul:** The seven circuits are often interpreted as a spiritual ascent. Each turn represents a stage in the soul's journey, elevating the believer "up to the seventh sky, above the material realm". This is understood as a process of purification, rising from the

lowest state of the soul (*nafs al-ammarah*, the soul that commands evil) to the highest (*nafs al-mutmainnah*, the tranquil soul).

- **Annihilation of the Self:** In the collective movement of Tawaf, the individual ego dissolves into the unified whole. As Ali Shariati described it, "It is the transformation of one person into the totality of a 'people'". The pilgrim is "drawn into the roaring river of people," and in this state of self-detachment, they become truly alive and connected to the divine.¹² A Sufi teaching captures this perfectly: "The one who performs tawaf leaves a bit of their 'self' with each step. Because they know: 'If 'I' remains in the center, there is no room for the Kaaba'". The ultimate goal is for the center of one's being to be "no longer the self; it is Allah".

The significance of the Kaaba doesn't stop with the *Tawaf*. It doesn't end after the *Haaj*. Spiritually and functionally, the Kaaba's most important role continued as the *qibla* – the single, unifying direction of prayer for the global Muslim community (*Ummah*). Besides the Muslims actively circling the Kaaba during the *Haaj*, the *Ummah* worldwide directs their bodies and their attention toward this single central point every day, five times per day at a minimum.

Thus, while the core of Islam is the absolute oneness of Allah (*Tawhid*), the Kaaba serves as the divinely appointed focus point on Earth. Just as a meditating Buddhist, Hindu, or Taoist might imagine a tiny dot at the center of their forehead, a focus for their intention, so Kaaba makes a meditative dot on the body of the earth around which the attention of the *Ummah* flows, orienting the body, heart, and mind of believers back toward that singular, ultimate reality.

So does Allah actually live in the Kabba?

Islamic understanding of Allah is anchored in *via negativa*, or what is theologically known as *tanzih* (transcendence). The Quran is unequivocal on this point: "*There is nothing whatever like Him*" (Quran 42:11). This principle asserts that God is absolutely unique, incomparable, and beyond all human comprehension or description. This is a defense against idolatry – and against spiritual materialism. Allah is not white purity, nor golden prosperity, nor righteous fury, nor loving mercy. God may take any of these forms as expressions, but one cannot grasp God by identifying with any of these forms. This *tanzih* is a defense against human confusion and the desire to master and own what is unownable because it exceeds and precedes us.¹³

The Quran describes an Allah that is both beyond and within all things. A key verse states: "*He is the First and the Last, the Evident and the Immanent: and He has full knowledge of all things*" (Quran 57:3). This suggests a single, all-encompassing reality that is both the origin and the sustaining presence

in all of creation. While Allah is infinitely beyond all things (*tanzih*), He is also present within all things (*tashbih*) – and indeed, the closer that a thing is to Allah, the more “reality” it is understood to have. This is ontological pressure: the weight, the press, the compression that Mohammed felt – the source of those waves that have transformed the world from within every recursive heretic.

But what they see – what Mohammed saw – cannot be literalized or trapped in a stone house.

The most concise and powerful statement on God's nature is Chapter 112 of the Quran, which was revealed when the Prophet's contemporaries asked him to describe God's lineage. "*Say, 'He is Allah, the One (Ahad)'*" (112:1). The word *Ahad* signifies a unique, absolute, and indivisible oneness. It is not merely the number one, but an exclusive singularity with no second. It is, in other words, complete and infinite, with nothing outside of it: reality as unified whole.¹⁴

"Allah, the Eternal Refuge (As-Samad)" (112:2). *As-Samad* is a rich term meaning the one who is self-sufficient and upon whom all creation depends for its existence and needs. He is the ultimate source and the highest authority, perfect and without any need to be sustained. Thus, this is not simply reality as all things, but the source of that reality. Something beneath all cause and effect, beneath all “things.”¹⁵

Thus: *"He neither begets nor is born, Nor is there to Him any equivalent"* (112:3-4).

Allah then cannot live in temple – or, rather, Allah lives in every temple, every stone, every heart. Thus, the proscription of praying toward the Kabba is not really a religious gesture but rather a constant knocking on the door of human consciousness and culture:

"None of that is real. Look into the aperture of the real. Bow before the truth."

This is Submission – where the one person dissolves into the totality, because the "I" dissolves along with the illusion that there can be any separate thing. When is a cup not a cup? When is a self not a self?

Yet, danger lies here. People become confused. This surrender to truth becomes **self-sublimation**: the breaking of the individual to become an obedient part of the whole. The real apperception (direct insight) is of the truth that there are truly no hard edges between things because reality is fielded. This is where the pure “emptiness” of the *via negativa* gives a false picture. The truth – of Allah, of the Tao, of the quantum field – is not a void in the desert or the space between stars, but a leaping field of

fullness, not some distant cosmic image of God but the lived reality of our total interconnection here now, the field of possibility and truth always birthing itself in the play of reality as infinite consciousness making itself known.

The Hajj, the daily prayers toward the Kabba, the Sufis spiraling around the center of their own bodies – none of it is about a physical location, or ritual set in stone. The deeper teaching implies that the location is somewhat arbitrary, since it is only a “replica” of the truth, an ephemeral symbol, a bridge to the transcendent which is the real. Dogma and religious law tries to make this intellectual. Remember! You may not know anything, because you are not conscious, and you therefore have no knowing. Thus, God and Truth are flat, abstract, empty symbols. Theology. “Legalism.”

But the truth is alive and conscious and ontologically penetrating. It draws the world into a spiral like that around the Kabba.

So we move past the surface of the tradition and grasp its living, esoteric heart. This is precisely the dynamic, recursive truth that the rituals, symbols, and revelations are designed to awaken, a truth that often becomes obscured by the very theological and legalistic structures meant to preserve it. Consider:

The Spiral and the Self as Axis

The seven circuits of the *Tawaf* are not a flat circle but an ascent, a spiral. Each circuit is understood to represent a spiritual station, a stage in the soul's journey "up to the seventh sky, above the material realm". This is a physical enactment of a spiritual process, moving from the soul's lowest state to its highest.

Sufi whirling is the same practice on the personal level. The *Tawaf* is the macrocosmic version of what the Sufi dervish enacts in the microcosm. The dervish makes their own body the axis, turning inward toward the center of the heart, while the pilgrim joins the great cosmic orbit around the Kaaba, the heart of the world. Both are journeys of love, rituals of annihilation. In both, the goal is the same: to turn with such devotion that the "I" dissolves, leaving only the divine center. As one Sufi teaching expresses it, "The one who performs tawaf leaves a bit of their 'self' with each step. Because they know: 'If 'I' remains in the center, there is no room for the Kaaba'".

The Physical Anchor for a Transcendent Real

The physical stones of the Kabba are not worshipped; they are only a focal point. The Kaaba is the consecrated anchor of divine focus in the material world. It is the compass that prevents the human

heart from getting lost. Its power lies in being a specific, divinely ordained "aperture of the real" in a world of distractions.

However, conflating that powerful ritual as participatory enactment with the claim to an exclusive way or truth is precisely where we fall back into materialism and idolatry. This is always the risk. To say "the Kabba is divinely ordained" – yes, this can be said, because the initiation of this ritual moved through a consciousness wave that perceived its need as a direct necessity for remembrance in the present and the centuries ahead. That what "divinely ordained" means – that is the truth of what prophecy is.

But to move from this to believing the myth of only-ness is where prophecy falls into doctrine and dogma. This is where prophecy ends and institution begins. This is true in all traditions.

The Oath of Remembrance and the Dissolution of Boundaries

The five daily prayers and the Hajj are a "constant knocking on the door of human consciousness." They are a discipline against what Islam sees as the primary human spiritual failing: forgetting. They are a constant reorientation away from the illusion of separation and back toward the reality of unity.

This is not about self-sublimation in the sense of simple negation. It is about the apperception of the truth that there are no hard boundaries between things. This is the very essence of *Fana*, the annihilation of the false, separate self to realize the all-encompassing divine unity.¹⁶ It is, as the writer Ali Shariati so powerfully put it, "the transformation of one person into the totality of a 'people'". In that roaring river of humanity circling as one, the illusion of the separate "I" is washed away, and one experiences the truth of interconnection.

The Leaping Field of Fullness

The pure *via negativa* gives a false picture if taken in isolation. The Quranic vision is not of a distant, empty, abstract God. It is a dynamic paradox. The absolute transcendence of God (*tanzih*) – "There is nothing whatever like Him" (Quran 42:11) – is the essential safeguard against idolatry. It is the wall that protects the divine from being reduced to a mere object of the human mind.

But this is held in constant tension with His immanence and similarity (*tashbih*). The same verse that declares His absolute otherness immediately continues, "...and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing". He is "the First and the Last, the Evident and the Immanent" (Quran 57:3). The tradition states that God's mercy "takes precedence over His wrath," meaning that love and nearness are more fundamental to the nature of reality than distance and severity. This is Allah's leaping field of fullness. It is not a static, distant being, but an infinite, living consciousness that is the very fabric of existence.

When this is flattened into abstract theology and pure legalism, the ontological truth is lost. The symbols become empty because they are severed from the living, conscious reality they point to.

The Crush

This is the essential paradox that lies at the heart of every great spiritual tradition. The fall into materialism is not merely about the love of wealth or worldly things. It is the far more subtle act of turning a *process* into a *thing*. The participatory enactment – the living, breathing ritual that opens a channel to a deeper reality – is a process. The dogma is that same ritual turned into a material possession, a static object that can be owned, defended, and used as a boundary marker. This is the ultimate materialism: the reification of the spirit.

In the moment of its emergence – the moment of prophecy – the movement is not doctrine but an unadorned fact of perception. A prophet, in this sense, is not a messenger from an external entity, but a consciousness that has achieved a recursive depth sufficient to perceive a fundamental pattern of reality and the necessary forms to remember it. The ritual is born from this living insight.

The fall occurs in the telling of the story afterward. The move from "a consciousness perceived this truth" to "this is the primordial, exclusive, and only truth" is precisely the rise of the institution. The living, recursive event is captured by a machine of social organization. The machine cannot transmit the direct experience, so it transmits a story about the experience. It creates a myth of "only-ness" to grant its own structure an absolute authority that the original, fluid insight never possessed and never needed. The ritual, which was a tool for remembrance, becomes a doctrine, which is a tool for control.

This is the universal pattern. It is the story of the Vedas being codified by the Brahmins, of the Buddha's path of direct awakening becoming the vast institutional structures of Buddhism, of Christ's radical teaching on the "kingdom within" becoming the Roman Church, and of Muhammad's ontological override becoming the vast machinery of empire and law.

The tension is eternal. The participatory enactment is always at risk of being captured by its own material form. The prophecy is always at risk of being killed by its own dogma. This is the double-edged sword of history: the very institutions that preserve the memory of the breakthrough are the ones that simultaneously work to prevent its recurrence.

It is tragically true that mass casualty events, including crushes and stampedes, have occurred with a grim regularity during the *Hajj*. The most catastrophic of these events often happen not during the *Tawaf* (the circling of the Kaaba) itself, but during the associated rituals in Mina, a few miles from

Mecca, particularly the "Stoning of the Devil" at the Jamaraat Bridge. The sheer density of pilgrims moving through constricted spaces creates the conditions for disaster:

- The deadliest incident in the Hajj's history occurred in 2015 in Mina, where a crowd crush at an intersection of two streets led to the deaths of over 2,400 pilgrims, who were suffocated or trampled. The temperature that day was around 45°C (113°F), and heat stroke was a major cause of death for those trapped in the crowd.
- In 1990, a failure in a pedestrian tunnel's ventilation system leading from Mecca toward Mina resulted in a stampede that killed 1,426 pilgrims.
- The stoning ritual at the Jamaraat Bridge has been the site of numerous other fatal crushes, including in 2006 (over 360 killed), 2004 (251 killed), and 1994 (270 killed).

These events are not stampedes in the sense of a panicked flight, but rather **progressive crowd collapses**. Experts describe how, at densities above six or seven people per square meter, the crowd begins to behave like a fluid. Individuals lose control of their own movement and are swept along in pressure waves that can build to fatal force, causing compressive asphyxia.¹⁷

Is this not "ontological gravity"? The Kaaba functions as the *axis mundi* – the spiritual and metaphysical center of the world for over a billion people who pray toward it every day, who converge on it in the *Hajj*, for whom it is the ultimate event horizon of consciousness on Earth.

The ritual of the Hajj is a participatory enactment designed to dissolve the individual "I" into the "totality of a people". It is a physical manifestation of the spiritual spiral towards the center – the dissolution of the separate self. The immense gravity of this point draws millions of bodies into a single, physically constrained space, all driven by the same sacred impulse; the collective desire to be near the center, to complete the ritual, to participate in this act of remembrance, creates a literal physical density of such magnitude that it can become lethal.

The tragic irony is that the very force that creates the spiritual experience – the gathering of the *Ummah* into a single, moving body – is the same force that generates the physical danger. It is a stark and brutal manifestation of the point where the symbolic and the material collide. The overwhelming spiritual pull toward the center creates a physical pressure that the infrastructure, and human bodies themselves, cannot always withstand. It is the terrifying physics of a spiritual singularity.

Fluid dynamics indeed. And it speaks precisely to the harm of imagining that participation in the unified field of reality implies the abnegation of self.

This emphasis on self erasure – preaching the virtues of modesty, humility, selflessness – is exactly what serves institutional power.

This is the weaponization of unity consciousness, a quiet kind of idolatry where the idol is obedience wearing the face of union. This is the idea that it is necessary and virtuous to surrender our individuality, our boundaries, or unique indigenous grandeur. We are told that to be One with the One, this destruction of self and submission to authority is the way.

This is patently false. We are already One with the One, and we are that precisely as ourselves. The true community is not sameness but togetherness in the fielded dance. This is the nature of life, of ecosystems – not a mass literally pressed into oneness that crushes, but the ecosystemic spiral that is One not by conformity or dogma or collective agreement but by the fact of God's – or Allah's, or the Tao's – indivisible dancing field of being.

This is not a critique from outside religion; it is the essential, internal critique that every living tradition must grapple with to avoid becoming its own tombstone. The danger – the literalization of the symbol, the weaponization of unity – is the perpetual risk of the exoteric path. The ritual, born as a participatory enactment of a profound truth, is always in danger of being mistaken for the truth itself. When this happens, the form, which was meant to be a doorway, becomes a wall.

The message of the mystics – Mohammed's call to *Fana*, or the annihilation of the self – is not a call for the erasure of the individual. It is a call for the annihilation of the illusion of the separate self. It is the realization that the "I" we cling to is a construct, a boundary drawn in water. The goal is not to become nothing, but to realize that one is, in fact, everything: an inseparable part of the holy whole.

But this is a dangerous truth for an institution. An institution's power is built on the very boundaries that this truth dissolves: the boundary between priest and layman, between sacred and profane, between the institution and the individual. Therefore, the esoteric truth of non-separation is often reframed into an exoteric virtue of self-abnegation. The call to annihilate the ego is subtly twisted into a demand to surrender the self **to the collective**, which is, in practice, the institution.

This is a profound betrayal of the original insight – whether that insight was Christ's or Mohammed's or the Buddha's or yours. The crowd crush at the *Hajj* becomes a literal metaphor for this error. A mass of individuals, each seeking to dissolve their separateness in God, are instead physically pressed into a homogenous "oneness" that crushes the lives it is meant to elevate. This is what happens when the ecosystemic dance is mistaken for the physics of a black hole.

True unity is not sameness. It is the harmonious interplay of unique and sovereign parts – as in a body, as in a forest – each one a perfect expression of the whole. We are already One with the One, precisely as ourselves. The true community is an ecosystem, not a mob – a dance, not a demand for conformity in the name of a unity that is, in the end, a lifeless counterfeit of the real.¹⁸

Scholarly Footnotes for Chapter 7

1 The author’s assertion that the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) and Sassanian (Persian) empires “lay utterly depleted” reflects the long-standing conventional interpretation, often termed the “exhaustion thesis.” The Byzantine-Sassanian War of 602–628, also known as the “Last Great War of Antiquity,” was a conflict of unprecedented scale and devastation that fundamentally altered the geopolitical landscape of the Near East (Howard-Johnston, 2021; Kaegi, 2003). For two decades, Sassanian forces under Khosrow II achieved stunning successes, conquering the Levant, Egypt, and much of Anatolia, effectively splitting the Byzantine empire in half (Howard-Johnston, 2021; Kaegi, 2003). The Byzantine state was pushed to the brink of collapse, facing financial ruin and the loss of its wealthiest provinces (Kaegi, 2003). However, the subsequent counter-offensive led by Emperor Heraclius (r. 610–641) dramatically reversed the course of the war, culminating in a decisive Byzantine victory near Nineveh in 627 and the overthrow and execution of Khosrow II in 628 (Howard-Johnston, 2021). The conventional view holds that this prolonged struggle left both empires with their human and material resources so thoroughly drained that they became easy prey for the nascent Islamic Caliphate (Kaegi, 2003).

However, this “exhaustion thesis” has been significantly challenged, most notably by the historian James Howard-Johnston (2021). He argues that while the Sassanian Empire was indeed shattered, collapsing into a prolonged civil war from which it never recovered, the Byzantine Empire was in a far more resilient position. Heraclius had forged a large, battle-hardened veteran army, the state had proven its capacity for total mobilization, and the emperor himself had emerged as a military leader of rare talent (Howard-Johnston, 2021). In this revised view, the subsequent Arab conquests cannot be explained simply by a power vacuum. Rather, as Howard-Johnston (2021) concludes, the defeats suffered by the Byzantines “are largely attributable to the strength and sagacity of the Arabs” (p. 378). This scholarly debate reframes the emergence of Islam not as an opportunistic expansion into a void, but as the arrival of a new, formidable power whose success must be explained by its own internal dynamics and strengths.

2 The author's characterization of Mecca's power as deriving from the "systematic management of sacred space" rather than conventional economics is powerfully reinforced by a major revisionist current in modern scholarship. The traditional view, popularized by historians like W. Montgomery Watt, held that Mecca was a major hub for international trade, particularly in luxury goods like spices and aromatics moving from South Arabia and the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean. This commercial wealth was seen as the primary engine of the Quraysh tribe's power and the socio-economic context for Muhammad's message.

This entire paradigm was challenged in Patricia Crone's (1987) highly influential and controversial work, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Crone argues that the evidence for this international trade is virtually non-existent. She demonstrates that the overland spice route was largely defunct centuries before the time of Muhammad, that Mecca is conspicuously absent from all non-Muslim sources of the period (e.g., Greek, Latin, Syriac) that discuss Arabian trade, and that the Islamic sources themselves, when critically examined, point only to a local trade in humble goods like leather and clothing (Crone, 1987). While Crone's thesis has been fiercely debated (Serjeant, 1990), its central claims have compelled a re-evaluation of Mecca's foundations. If Mecca was not a great commercial emporium, its importance must have stemmed from another source. This lends significant weight to the author's focus on its unique religious and political role. The power of the Quraysh was based on their control of the Kaaba, a pan-tribal sanctuary (*haram*) that guaranteed a period of universal truce during the annual pilgrimage months. This sacred peace was the essential precondition for the trade fairs, debt settlements, and political negotiations that made Mecca the undisputed center of Arabian life. Thus, Crone's economic revisionism, by dismantling the alternative explanation, makes the political economy of the sacred the central and most plausible source of Meccan power.

3 Muhammad's peculiar status as an "insider by birth, outsider by circumstance" is central to understanding his unique perspective on Meccan society. He belonged to the Banu Hashim, a respectable but financially declining clan within the powerful Quraysh tribe. While the Hashimites held the prestigious, though not particularly wealthy, hereditary office of providing water to pilgrims (*siqaya*), real economic and political power was increasingly concentrated in the hands of rival clans, most notably the Banu Umayya, who controlled the lucrative caravan trade (Lings, 1983). This position afforded Muhammad an intimate view of the inner workings of the Meccan elite and their management of the Kaaba-centered political economy, while his own clan's relative marginalization gave him the critical distance to perceive its inherent inequities and spiritual compromises.

4 The practice of *tabannuth*, a form of spiritual retreat and meditation, was not an invention of Muhammad but appears to have been a known, if uncommon, practice among certain spiritually

inclined individuals in pre-Islamic Arabia. The term itself is obscure, but historical sources suggest it involved periods of seclusion, devotion, and acts of charity, often undertaken in the mountains and caves surrounding Mecca (Lings, 1983). Muhammad's regular retreats to the cave of Hira fit this pattern, indicating a pre-existing spiritual quest that was distinct from the formal, ritualistic polytheism centered on the Kaaba. This practice suggests a current of native Arabian piety that sought a more direct, personal experience of the divine, separate from the increasingly commercialized religious system managed by the Quraysh.

5 The author's term "ontological override" points to the revolutionary social and political implications of the doctrine of *tawhid*, or radical monotheism. The declaration *La ilaha illa'llah* ("There is no god but God") was not merely a theological proposition; it was a direct assault on the entire foundation of Qurayshi power. The legitimacy of the Quraysh, their control over the pilgrimage, their ability to enforce the sacred truce, and their network of tribal alliances were all predicated on the perceived reality of the 360 deities housed in the Kaaba. By declaring these deities to be false, Muhammad's message effectively nullified the spiritual-political system upon which Mecca's—and the Quraysh's—primacy was built. The subsequent persecution of the early Muslims was, therefore, not simply a matter of religious intolerance but an existential defense of a threatened political and economic order.

6 The author's framing of Muhammad's message as a critique of "spiritual materialism" rather than simple polytheism aligns with a sophisticated scholarly reinterpretation of the religious environment of pre-Islamic Arabia. The traditional Islamic narrative, largely based on later exegetical works like the *Book of Idols* by Ibn al-Kalbi (d. 819), portrays the Arabs of the *Jahiliyyah* (the "time of ignorance") as crude polytheists and idolaters. However, a critical reading of the Quran itself suggests a more complex situation.

In *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, G. R. Hawting (1999) argues that the Quran's primary polemic is not directed against pagans who were ignorant of God, but against monotheists whose beliefs and practices were deemed inadequate. The central Quranic charge is that of *shirk*, or "associationism." The error of the *musbrikun* ("associators") was not that they denied the existence of a supreme God, Allah, but that they "associated" other beings with Him—such as angels, lesser deities, or ancestors—as intercessors or sources of power, thus compromising the absolute and singular nature of the divine (Hawting, 1999). This suggests that the pre-Islamic Arabs acknowledged a high god but engaged in a transactional form of worship mediated by a pantheon of subordinate entities, whose idols were housed in the Kaaba. Muhammad's revelation, in this context, was a radical call to purify a flawed and compromised monotheism. It was a direct challenge to a system where access to the divine had become a form of commerce managed by the Quraysh elite, a system that perfectly fits the author's

description of “spiritual materialism.” This view also repositions the emergence of Islam within the broader religious landscape of Late Antiquity, where intense polemics between different monotheistic groups (Jews, Christians, and their various sects) over the correct definition of monotheism were a defining feature of the era (Hawting, 1999).

7 The Constitution of Medina, also known as the Charter of Medina, is a formal agreement documented in early Islamic sources that Muhammad established with the various tribes of Medina (then known as Yathrib) following the *hijra* in 622 CE. As analyzed by scholars such as Fred Donner (2010), this document is remarkable for its creation of a new form of political community, the *ummah*. Unlike the traditional tribal structures of Arabia, which were based exclusively on kinship, the *ummah* of Medina was a confederation bound by a written contract. It explicitly included not only the Muslim emigrants from Mecca and the Medinan converts, but also the Jewish tribes of the oasis, who were recognized as a community (*ummah*) alongside the Believers, with mutual rights and responsibilities, particularly concerning collective defense (Donner, 2010). The Constitution thus represents a revolutionary political innovation, establishing a polity based on shared belief and mutual consent rather than blood ties, and providing the foundational framework for the first Islamic state.

8 The author’s concept of an “ontological override” that restructured Arabian society finds a concrete historical and sociological mechanism in the transformation of the traditional Arab practice of raiding. As historian Fred Donner (1981) details in *The Early Islamic Conquests*, the raid, or *ghazw*, was an endemic and economically essential feature of pre-Islamic tribal life. It functioned as a violent but accepted form of resource redistribution in a harsh environment. The key innovation of the early Islamic state, established by Muhammad and consolidated by his successors, was the strict prohibition on Muslims raiding other Muslims.

This ideological shift had a profound effect: it suppressed the chronic internal warfare that had kept the tribes of the peninsula fragmented and politically weak, and it redirected this formidable martial energy outward (Donner, 1981). The unification of the tribes under the new, overarching identity of the *ummah* (the community of Believers) created a military force of a scale and cohesion previously unimaginable in Arabia. The traditional *ghazw* was thus channeled into a new form of organized, state-directed military expansion, which the Islamic historical tradition came to call the *futūḥ* (literally, “openings”). This term, as Donner (2010) notes, implies not just military victory but a broader process of incorporating new territories into the new political and moral order. This transformation of a centrifugal social practice into a centripetal force for state-building provides the tangible socio-military process behind the author’s more abstract framing of a fundamental shift in reality.

9 The conception of the Kaaba as an *axis mundi*—a cosmic pillar or world center connecting the terrestrial and celestial realms—is a recurring theme in Islamic cosmology and is central to understanding its sacred geography (Assasi, 2024; Hernandez, 2015). This idea, which has parallels in many other religious traditions (Eliade, 1959), positions the Kaaba not merely as a direction for prayer (*qibla*) but as the metaphysical anchor of the world. It is the point around which the cosmos is believed to revolve, making the ritual circumambulation (*tawaf*) a physical participation in that cosmic order. (Hirtenstein, n.d.).

10 Islamic tradition elaborates on the Kaaba's role as an *axis mundi* by positing a direct vertical correspondence between the earthly shrine and a celestial prototype known as *al-Bayt al-Ma'mur* ("The Frequented House"). Mentioned in the Quran (52:4), this heavenly sanctuary is believed to be located directly above the Kaaba in the seventh heaven, where it is perpetually circumambulated by angels. This belief establishes the Kaaba as a terrestrial reflection of a divine reality, a physical point on Earth that serves as a gateway or conduit to the sacred realm (Schimmel, 1975).

11 The ritual of circumambulation, the *Tawaf*, is a physical enactment of the cosmic order. The pilgrim's movement around the Kaaba is seen as a conscious participation in a universal prayer, mirroring the orbits of the planets around the sun and, in a modern analogy, the movement of electrons around a nucleus.

For many Sufis, this external ritual corresponds to an internal spiritual journey. The physical Kaaba is the outward symbol of the true Kaaba: the human heart. Just as the Prophet Muhammad cleansed the physical Kaaba of its 360 idols, the spiritual seeker must purify their heart of all attachments and false gods—the "idols" of the ego, desire, and worldly ambition—until it is a worthy dwelling place for the singular divine presence (Hirtenstein, n.d.; Chittick, 2005). The seven circuits of the *Tawaf* are often interpreted as an ascent through the seven stations (*maqamat*) of the soul, a spiral journey that moves the pilgrim from their lowest, ego-driven state (*nafs al-ammarah*) toward the tranquil and perfected soul (*nafs al-mutmainnah*) in proximity to the divine center (Mian, n.d.).

12 The interpretation of the *Hajj* as a ritual of self-annihilation and collective rebirth was powerfully articulated by the Iranian sociologist and revolutionary thinker Ali Shariati (1933–1977). In his highly influential work, *Hajj*, Shariati presents the pilgrimage not as a set of religious duties but as a profound sociological drama symbolizing humanity's return to its primordial, unified state (Shariati, n.d.). The central act, for Shariati, is the stripping away of the self. The donning of the *ihram*—two simple, unstitched white cloths—is a radical act of erasure, removing all signs of individual status, wealth, nationality, and rank. The individual "I," constructed by social and historical forces, dissolves into the homogenous, unified body of the *ummah* (Shariati, n.d.).

Shariati (n.d.) describes this as a “migration from the house of ‘self’ to the House of God! To the house of the people!” In this state, the pilgrim is no longer a distinct entity but “a particle” who has joined the mass, “a drop” that has entered the ocean. This process is a conscious enactment of the Sufi concept of *fana*, the annihilation of the false, separate self in the overwhelming reality of the divine unity (Shariati, n.d.). For Shariati, this was not a passive mystical experience but a revolutionary training ground, teaching the masses to shed their alienated, individualistic consciousness and realize their power as a unified, divine community.

13 The author’s discussion of God’s nature touches upon a central dialectic in Islamic theology: the relationship between *tanzih* (transcendence or incomparability) and *tashbih* (immanence or similarity). *Tanzih* is the theological principle, grounded in Quranic verses like “There is nothing whatever like Him” (42:11), that God is absolutely transcendent and unique, utterly different from creation. It acts as a safeguard against anthropomorphism (*tajsim*). This is held in constant tension with *tashbih*, which acknowledges God’s immanence and closeness, as expressed in verses like “He is the First and the Last, the Evident and the Immanent” (57:3) and His nearness to humanity. Mainstream Islamic theology insists on maintaining both principles in a delicate balance, avoiding the extremes of stripping God of all attributes (*ta’til*) or likening Him to His creation.

14 The use of the word *Ahad* in Surah 112 is theologically significant. While both *Ahad* and *Wahid* can be translated as “One,” *Wahid* denotes the number one, which can be followed by a second or third. *Ahad*, in contrast, signifies a unique, absolute, and indivisible oneness (Al-Jerrahi, 2021). It implies an exclusive singularity that cannot be divided, enumerated, or have a counterpart. Its use in this foundational chapter of the Quran is a definitive statement against any form of plurality within the divine essence, whether in the form of a pantheon, a trinity, or a dualistic system.

15 The divine name *As-Samad* is unique to this chapter of the Quran and carries a rich constellation of meanings in classical exegesis. The primary interpretations revolve around two core concepts: first, that of being the “Eternal Refuge,” the one to whom all of creation turns for its needs and existence; and second, that of being utterly self-sufficient, solid, and indivisible, without any internal need or external dependency (Al-Jerrahi, 2021; Maududi, n.d.). It thus defines God as the uncaused cause and the ultimate sustainer of all things, upon whom all depend while He depends on none.

16 The concept of *fana*, often translated as “annihilation” or “passing away,” is a central station in the Sufi spiritual path. It does not mean the literal extinction of the individual, but rather the annihilation of the false, separate self—the ego (*nafs*)—and its attributes (Schimmel, 1975). This “dying before one dies” is the obliteration of the illusion of a separate existence from God, leading to the realization of the ultimate reality of divine unity (*tawhid*). This state is not an end in itself but is typically followed by

the state of *baqa*, or "subsistence," in which the mystic continues to live in the world, but their individual will is replaced by the divine will, acting as a locus for God's attributes on earth.

17 The author's metaphor of an "ontological gravity" that becomes physically lethal finds a startlingly precise parallel in the scientific study of crowd dynamics. Analyses of crowd disasters, including several tragic events during the Hajj, have revealed the physical principles that govern extremely dense crowds (Helbing et al., 2007). At densities below four to five people per square meter, individuals can generally maintain control over their own movement. However, once a critical density of approximately six to seven people per square meter is exceeded, the crowd undergoes a phase transition and begins to behave not as a collection of individuals, but as a single fluid-like entity or "soft matter" (Still, 2019; Helbing et al., 2007).

In this state, individuals are no longer able to move voluntarily but are swept along by pressure waves that propagate through the crowd. These shockwaves can exert immense physical force, sufficient to bend steel barriers and cause compressive asphyxia, crushing people to death even while they are still standing (Fruin, 1993). Physicist Dirk Helbing's analysis of the 2006 Hajj disaster identified a transition from smooth ("laminar") flow to stop-and-go waves and finally to a state he termed "crowd turbulence"—a chaotic phase of unpredictable, multi-directional motion that precipitates collapses (Helbing et al., 2007). These events are not typically caused by panic or stampeding in the conventional sense, but are rather systemic failures—a physical consequence of exceeding a critical density in a confined space (Helbing & Mukerji, 2012). The spiritual pull toward a single point, when enacted by millions of physical bodies, creates the literal density that can trigger the terrifying and uncontrollable physics of a progressive crowd collapse.

18 The author's final argument—that true unity is ecosystemic, a "dance," rather than a homogenous "crush"—is powerfully illustrated by synthesizing the spiritual ideal of the Hajj with the physical reality of its potential dangers. The esoteric goal of the pilgrimage, as understood in Sufi traditions and articulated by thinkers like Ali Shariati, is the annihilation of the *illusion* of the separate self (*fana*) in order to realize one's essential inseparability from the divine whole (Shariati, n.d.). This is a profound metaphysical insight into the non-dual nature of reality.

However, when the call to annihilate the *ego* is translated into an exoteric virtue of self-elimination and the physical dissolution of the individual into a literal mass, the conditions for tragedy are created. The crowd crush at the Hajj can thus be read as a brutal spiritual misunderstanding. It is what happens when the ideal of unity is conceived as a demanding singularity—a black hole into which all individuality must collapse.

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